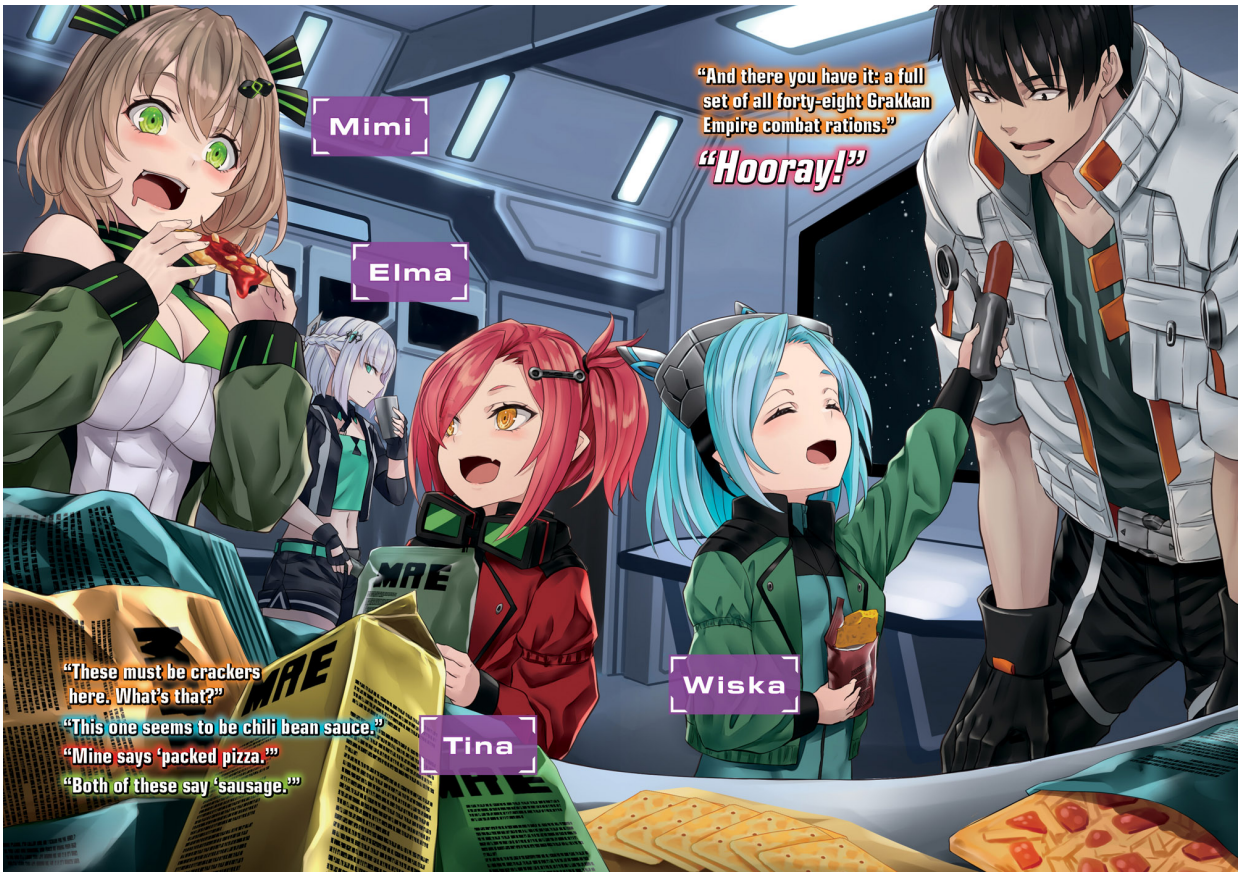
REBORN AS A
SPACE MERCENARY
I WOKE UP PILOTING THE STRONGEST STARSHIP!
NOVEL 6
WRITTEN BY
Ryuto
ILLUSTRATED BY
Tetsuhiro Nabeshima

Table of Contents

Color Inserts
Table of Contents Page
Title Page
Copyrights and Credits
Prologue
Chapter 1: Don’t Blame Me!
Chapter 2: Center Stage
Chapter 3: Captain “Psycho” Hiro
Chapter 4: An Annoying Woman
Chapter 5: A Captain’s Duty
Chapter 6: Recon Squad
Chapter 7: Pulling Out
Chapter 8: Mimi and Rations
Chapter 9: The Crystal War
Epilogue
EX: Lieutenant Commander Serena’s Day Off
Afterword
About the Author
Newsletter

Normally, Silver-Winged and Silver Sword Badges are awarded for great and conspicuous exploits in battle. The Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge, however, is awarded only to those who charge into the fray alone, going above and beyond the call of duty—typically dying in the process.
"What happens if a living person has it, then?"
"People will believe you are a deeply bloodthirsty person who should be maintained as an ally at all costs."
Serena
Mei
Hiro
Hiro becomes an honorary knight of the empire?!
REBORN AS A
SPACE MERCENARY
I woke up piloting the strongest starship!


Mimi
Elma
Tina
Wiska
"And there you have it: a full set of all forty-eight Grakkan Empire combat rations."
"Hooray!"
"These must be crackers here. What's that?"
"This one seems to be chili bean sauce."
"Mine says 'packed pizza.'"
"Both of these say 'sausage.'"
MRE

CONTENTS

Prologue

#1 Don’t Blame Me!

#2 Center Stage

#3 Captain “Psycho” Hiro

#4 An Annoying Woman

#5 A Captain’s Duty

#6 Recon Squad

#7 Pulling Out

#8 Mimi and Rations

#9 The Crystal War

Epilogue

EX Lieutenant Commander Serena’s Day Off

Afterword

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Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

MEZAMETARA SAIKYO SOBI TO UCHUSEN MOCHI DATTA NODE,
IKKODATE MEZASHITE YOHEI TOSHITE JIYU NI IKITAI Vol.6
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Prologue

I AWOKE TO someone jostling me.

Through my sleepy haze, I heard two muffled voices: one cheerful and one bashful. I opened my heavy eyes and squinted toward the one manhandling me. There I found a red-haired girl with an oddly excited look on her face, and a blue-haired girl doing her darnedest to stop the redhead's savagery.

They'd noticed I was awake; two pairs of golden eyes peered into mine. Their faces were strikingly similar—clearly, these two were twins.

Uh, who are these girls…? I wondered.

"Hon, we're almost there!"

"Um, Miss Mei told us to wake you up…"

Right. How could I forget. The red-haired one, who spoke in a dialect oddly similar to the one used in Kansai back in my old world, was named Tina. The other, who was much meeker, was named Wiska. These were the mechanic twins who rode along with us now.

"…Morning, girls," I greeted them groggily.

"Mornin'! You're a real sleepyhead, hon."

"Good morning…hon."

***

"Ya really forgot who we were for a sec? How cruel," Tina complained.

"I don't think we've known each other long enough to call that 'cruel.'"

"R-right. We haven't…gone very far yet, anyway…" Wiska nervously agreed.

I strode through the spaceship corridor flanked by these girls whose heads barely reached my chest. Oh, this ship? It was mine. I had dubbed the Skithblathnir-class mothership *Black Lotus*, and it was able to contain two small spacecraft and 180 tons of cargo.

Resting safely inside the hangar was my beloved *Krishna*. When it was time to do battle, my crew and I could jump into *Krishna* and launch at a moment's notice. This *Black Lotus* could harbor small craft, carried two first-rate engineers, and could take aboard vastly more cargo than the *Krishna*. It was basically a mobile headquarters.

"*Gone very far?* Wiska's got such a dirty mind!" I teased.

"No kidding. I didn't know she had it in 'er."

Unable to take our banter, Wiska blushed madly and yelled, "I'm just trying to be discreet!"

Ha ha ha! You're too cute.

These girls were really short. Heck, not just short; everything about them was tiny. They were of the dwarven race, different from plain old humans. That's right, *dwarves*, the second most popular race in fantasy. Maybe even tied for first with elves.

Conventional dwarves were strong and tough, with skillful hands to boot. They were small-statured beings who lived underground and were accomplished at smithing and artisanal handicrafts. That's the common image of dwarves, right? A lot of fiction depicted dwarven women as having great bushy beards like the men, but in modern times, a lot of writers have shifted to imagining dwarven women as looking perpetually young no matter what their age.

In this universe, dwarves were decidedly the latter. These twins might've looked young at first glance, but they were full-fledged adults. Even though the tops of their heads barely came up to my chest, they were amazingly twenty-seven years old. Almost the same age as me!

Tina looked up at me and asked, "So? When are you gonna man up and try us out?"

"Uhh… I'm not sure that would work…physically?" I glanced down at her teeny torso. Was it, like…anatomically possible for us to do

something like that? She was way too itty-bitty, wasn't she?

"Don't you worry your pretty little head! We dwarves are built tough."

"Toughness isn't exactly the problem…"

"Didn't ya just say that's what the problem was?"

"…Fair," I surrendered. "I think you're both cute, and I know *logically* that you're both proper adults. But even if I know it intellectually…ethically, my danger sensor is going haywire when I even think about trying it."

"W-we aren't children," Wiska insisted.

"Yeah! Though, heh, I *am* a pure maiden. A pristine, untouched article! I can't speak for Wiska."

"I'm pristine, too! Goodness!" Wiska grabbed Tina in anger.

See, this was part of the issue right here. The way they resorted to violence so quickly made them seem childish, too. Or at least, it made me more hesitant to touch them, even knowing they were adults. Even if this sort of physicality was normal among dwarves, it felt wrong to me.

"Ladies, behave," I chastised them. "Pure maidens don't go around shouting about how they're 'pristine, untouched articles.' Besides, you don't need to try to force a relationship solely to conform with social norms. I think they're pretty weird norms, myself."

When I arrived here, I found myself in a universe full of strange and bizarre customs. The one that had really *astonished* me, though, was the custom regarding women riding a man's ship.

When mankind made its first forays into interstellar travel, the trips were extremely long. It wasn't uncommon for interstellar trips to last up to a year. When men and women traveled together under those circumstances —well, they would naturally get *closer* as long as nothing crazy happened. Basically…if a woman was aboard a man's ship, they were almost certain to end up in bed together.

Given all that, a man asking a woman to join him on his ship was essentially the same thing as asking her to enter a sexual relationship with him. If she agreed to join the crew, she was consenting to that relationship.

And if the woman took the initiative to bring up riding your ship, she was essentially saying she was ready to ride *you*.

The *Krishna* and *Black Lotus* were both my ships. And since Tina and Wiska crewed these ships, this custom naturally applied to them. Even though I hadn't touched a hair on their diminutive little heads, society would see them as my mistresses.

"On top of that, you're only here because your company ordered you to accompany me," I added. "Doesn't that exempt you from anything?"

They were traveling aboard my ships, but it wasn't of their own volition. Their company, Space Dwergr, had lent them to me in a professional capacity. In other words, the manufacturers of the *Black Lotus* were their employer, not me. They had been dispatched to collect data and maintain the Skithblathnir-model *Black Lotus* ship—ostensibly, at least.

"Ya think it's that easy? Trust me, Space Dwergr sent us here with eyes wide open."

After wrapping up her fist-based discussion with Wiska, Tina smoothly grasped my right hand and began walking down the corridor. Soon after, Wiska took my left hand and did the same. It seemed the older sister had been the victor this time.

"Are you two really okay with that…?" I asked them.

"If I'm into it, I know how to say no," Tina answered. "Now the question is: do *you* have a problem with *us*?"

"You sure are direct."

Was I really against a…more intimate…relationship with them? If I had to say, I honestly wasn't opposed. I was the kind of guy who ate whatever meals I was given—it just wasn't my thing to take advantage of my position or someone's sense of duty to force it.

"How about…when the time feels right?" I suggested. "As long as you're not just saying yes out of social obligation, I have no reason to refuse."

"For real? Guess it's all about the right timing then."

"Yeah. And setting the mood and all that," I added.

“I’m not good at that kind of thing… What about you, Wiska?” Tina called to her sister.

Wiska’s shame meter must have hit its limit from hearing us talk like this. She blushed even harder and walked hand in hand with me without saying a word.

“I think your little sister’s overstimulated,” I chuckled.

“Told ya, she’s got a dirty mind.”

“I-I-I am not dirty, okay?!” With her face bright red and tears shining in her eyes, Wiska started jerking my hand around and whacking me.

“Ow, ow! Why are you hitting me instead of her?!” Small though she may have been, dwarves were strong—that hurt! *Please stop.*

I did my best to console Wiska as we made our way to the *Black Lotus*’s bridge.

***

When we arrived on the bridge—after much pulling and smacking from Tina and Wiska—three women awaited us. Well, they weren’t really *waiting*; they were sitting at their stations as usual.

Mimi turned and greeted me with a smile. “Master Hiro, we’re almost there!”

Mimi was my first crew member—a normal girl who had grown up on a colony. Though she was petite, she had a bountiful bosom. Nowadays, she was our operator and quartermaster, and she was even learning how to manage buying and selling our loot and other goods all on her own. It was also Mimi who first taught me about this universe’s peculiar customs.

Elma, our resident silver-haired, long-eared beauty, was the next to speak. “I can’t imagine you slept very long,” said the elf. “When we arrive at our destination, let’s wrap up our business quick and get some shut-eye.” Though Elma was a veteran mercenary, a little blunder had landed her in hot water. Fortunately, I happened to be there to lend her a hand, and she ended up coming aboard as my second crew member.

And yes, she was an elf. When you think fantasy, you think elves; when you think elves, you think fantasy. That's just how entrenched they are in the genre. Beautiful men and women, long pointy ears, magic, extended lifespans—that's the elven race for you.

You might be wondering why elves were here in a science-fiction universe full of spaceships, laser beams, and railguns…but what do you want me to do about it? Also, though they didn't use it often, elves really *could* use magic.

The last of the trio was Mei, a long-limbed maid with an intelligent visage and black hair that flowed down to her waist. "Master, we will warp out into regular space in approximately fifteen minutes." Mei might have looked human at a glance, but the antennae and other mechanical parts around her ears proved she was an android. Specifically, she was a Maidroid, an android manufactured to serve a master.

Androids had miniature positronic brains, making them bona fide machine intelligence. Because of this, imperial law conceded them some human rights, although they weren't quite airtight. I'd be here forever if I started telling you the whole history of machine intelligence in this empire. Basically, I'd purchased her to serve me.

Before buying her, I'd customized her with the most powerful materials and parts, sparing no expense, so her specs were unprecedented for a Maidroid. She was so strong that, truthfully, I wasn't sure I could beat her in a fight, even if I wore my power armor. When it came to unarmed combat, she was far and away the strongest being on this ship.

"Maybe Mimi, Elma, and I should stand by on the *Krishna* for now," I suggested.

"I think so, too," Elma agreed, rising from her seat. Mimi did the same. "The Imperial Fleet is stationed there, but you can never be too safe."

Mei remained seated; she would stay here and man the helm of the *Black Lotus*.

"How do you like operating the *Black Lotus*?" I asked Elma.

"Can't say much yet since I haven't had long with it. You'll be the one doing the real work, Hiro."

“Agreed,” Mimi chimed in. “I only need to read the radar and sensors, and they aren’t much different from the *Krishna*’s. Piloting will probably be quite different though, won’t it?”

“Yeah, I’m sure it will. Mei, I’ll have you handle the *Black Lotus* for now.”

“Yes sir. Leave it to me.”

I took Mimi and Elma down to the *Krishna*. Tina and Wiska walked with us, probably planning to return to their own rooms near the hangar.

“I doubt I’ll need to pilot it often, but I’d better practice just in case,” I mused.

“Yup. You never know when something might prevent Mei from piloting the *Black Lotus*.”

Up until now, I’d left pilot duties on the *Black Lotus* to Mei and her machine intelligence, but Elma was right. If anything happened to her, it was totally plausible that we would have to pilot it ourselves. To that end, I’d been practicing in the cockpit simulator whenever possible.

“We *are* heading to the front lines against the crystal life-forms, right? You can never be too cautious in a place like that.”

“Yep, you can never be too cautious. Last think I want to do is underestimate them and end up assimilated or whatever.”

The Izulux System, which we would soon warp into, was the front line of defense in the war between the Imperial Fleet and the aliens known as crystal life-forms. Crystal life-forms were pretty annoying enemies. They reproduced quickly, and even the empire often found itself on its back foot when up against their offensive capabilities. Though they weren’t that strong one-on-one, they attacked in swarms. They were most dangerous when they were breaking down shields and eating into plating and hulls.

“Pretty terrifying…” I shuddered.

“We’re going to be okay though, right?” Wiska asked.

“I’m certain Master Hiro can handle it,” Mimi answered. “He was able to win the day in a harrowing battle between the crystal life-forms and the Belbellum Federation, after all.”

“He did what? I don’t like the sound of that,” Tina said.

Guilty. I had used the Singing Crystal to bring the crystal life-forms into the scuffle with Belbellum. It was a good memory…though I’m sure it wasn’t as fun for them.

“They don’t have interdicting abilities, so we’ll be untouchable as long as we’re in FTL drive,” I explained. “And as long as the imperial outpost isn’t attacked while we’re there, we won’t need to fight anyone.”

“Hiro… Usually when you say stuff like that, the exact opposite happens…” Elma groaned.

“Shut up! You’ll jinx us!” I cried.

“Remember when we went for that test drive with the *Krishna*…”

“Shut up!”

How rude. It’s not like stuff like that happened every time, all right? Besides, surely the imperial outpost could handle any attack.

Chapter 1:
Don't Blame Me!

"HMM…?"

Mimi was the first to notice that something was up. Or more accurately, Mei was the first, since she'd used the data link to send the warning to the *Krishna*. Anyway, Mimi was the first in the *Krishna*'s cockpit to see it.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

I had a bad feeling, and it was getting worse by the minute. Elma, sitting in the co-pilot's seat beside me, was clearly thinking the same. She operated her console with her brows knit together, checking the radar and sensor data sent over from the *Black Lotus*. I checked too.

"This is the outpost," Mimi said. "But they're…they're in the middle of battle, aren't they?"

"Hiro…"

"Master Hiro…"

"Don't look at me! How is this my fault?!"

They're being a bit ridiculous, aren't they? This stuff doesn't happen just because I said it might. If I could control the future, I'd

use it for more productive endeavors. I was still grumbling to myself when the mechanics contacted us.

"Hon…"

"This is all your fault…"

"I didn't do it, damn it!"

And don't call just to say that! I hung up on the twins and opened comms with Mei.

"We understand the situation. It looks like we're about to get caught up in this battle, so safety is our first priority. Hold nothing back."

“If we wish to prioritize safety, then hanging back and watching until things calm down is the most prudent option,” she observed.

“Sure, that’s on the table…but let’s decide after we know the details. I don’t see the Imperial Fleet losing a defensive battle at one of their own outposts, but if it turns into a rout, we might make a run for it.”

I’d rather not barrel into a losing battle and die—though I’d be glad to rally behind a winner. That said, the defensive weapons installed on the frontline bases were nothing to sneeze at. With that kind of firepower backing up the elite forces garrisoned here, I would be surprised if the fleet was at a disadvantage.

“Understood,” Mei replied. “We will soon arrive at the Izulux System outpost. Thirty seconds until we return to normal space.”

“Roger. Prep us to launch at a moment’s notice.”

“Yes sir. Leave it to me.”

After Mei cut off communications, I reconfigured the main monitor on the *Krishna* to display what the *Black Lotus*’s optic sensors saw.

“Now, let’s see what we’re up against…” I mumbled.

The stars flowing like bright lines across the screen gradually slowed and turned back into shining pinpoints in the black. Since the *Krishna* was currently inside the *Black Lotus*’s hangar, we didn’t hear the usual FTL *boom*.

Not that it matters. How do things look out there?

“Uh…is it just me, or are the crystals doing pretty well?” I asked.

“Looks like they’re putting up a fight,” Elma answered.

“Wow… There’re an incredible number of them out there.”

Mimi blanched at the scene before us: the Imperial Fleet outpost’s garrison was fighting hard against huge swarms of crystal life-forms. This was way beyond a minor skirmish.

Smaller crystals charged at the outpost and ships, bouncing off their shields and disintegrating under the garrison’s counterattacks. Medium-sized ones fired laser balls and beams before being destroyed too. The

biggest ones continuously spawned more medium and small crystal life-forms from their own hulking bodies to press the assault.

At this point, the empire was still holding the crystal life-forms at a safe distance, but their counterattacks were blocked by the medium and small crystals in the vanguard, preventing any of the garrison's fire from reaching the big bosses behind them.

The big bosses probably couldn't spawn little ones indefinitely. If the garrison could hold out, the crystal life-forms would eventually run out of fighters. But the same held true of the Imperial Fleet—they couldn't maintain this fighting force forever.

"It's a battle of attrition," I said.

"Yep. The battle hinges on the outpost and garrison's remaining supplies and troop fatigue."

"Well—let's get this over with… Mei!" I called out.

"Yes?"

"Flip us around and point the hatch toward the big crystal on the right. Launch the *Krishna* at full power, then turn back around and cover us. Also, communicate to the fleet that we'll be attacking those big bosses and negotiate a hefty reward."

"Understood, Captain."

The *Black Lotus*'s hangar hatch was on the lower aft of the ship. If we wanted to launch a small craft at maximum speed, we would have to turn our backs to the enemy. Our mothership was designed to send interceptors toward pursuing enemy craft, after all. Interceptors like this weren't made to be used like cannon fodder, like we were doing.

"So we're really doing this… We're really just *jumping* right in there," Elma groaned, annoyed.

"We should've known, Elma. This is normal." Mimi seemed resigned. She was used to it by now.

While I was busy admiring Mimi's personal growth, Mei finished turning the ship around. The hatch opened, and we saw the battle between the empire and crystal life-forms raging just ahead of us.

“There are many crystal life-forms along the way…” Mei warned me.

“I don’t mind. Send us out.”

“Understood, Captain. I wish you success in battle.”

As soon as Mei finished speaking, we experienced g-forces beyond what could be fully suppressed by the *Krishna*’s inertial control system. I felt myself being pressed back into the pilot’s seat. The inertial control system really was weak to external forces.

“Do you have a plan?!” Elma screamed as her body was pushed and pulled by the g-force.

“We zip in as fast as we can and fire anti-ship torpedoes at the big ones, and then we hightail it before they kill us! In other words, we’re just running in from the side!”

“I-is that…a *plan*?!” Mimi asked as she gritted her teeth.

It would probably work. The crystal life-forms were fighting the Imperial Fleet head-on, so their attention was fully focused on them. It would be a cinch to take them by surprise.

Of course, it wouldn’t be that simple. The medium-sized crystal life-forms seemed to work in tandem to attack a single target, but the smaller ones acted purely on instinct. They would be likely to charge at us the moment they saw us.

That said, their only methods of attack were to throw shards of themselves like shrapnel or to ram into us, so they would have trouble breaking through the *Krishna*’s shields. It would be a different story if we were both accelerating into each other head-on…but I wouldn’t do anything that ridiculously stupid.

The bigger ones were slow to react, so by the time they noticed me, I’d already be out of there. Some might try to pursue me, but as long as they were huddled together here, they couldn’t use their laser balls without hitting each other. Not to mention, the larger they were, the harder it would be for them to maneuver through all the others in their way.

Ideally, before the enemy even had a full grasp on the situation, the *Krishna* would close in on a big crystal life-form and launch an anti-ship reactive torpedo.

“Okay, let’s do this! Activate weapons system! And brace yourselves, ladies!”

“Roger!”

“Okay!”

I accelerated into the horde of crystal life-forms. Some small ones naturally reacted to this and came at me, but I evaded them and kept my eyes—and cannon—on the prize. Why? Because if I foolishly drew too much enemy attention and made them focus on little ol’ me rather than the whole Imperial Fleet, we could be crushed like a bug in an instant.

Of course, I would ultimately end up with a lot of enemy eyes on me either way, but now wasn’t the time for that. Not yet.

“Yeeehaaaw!”

Weaving between the gleaming crystals, I charged single-mindedly toward the big ’un. I had to admit crystal life-forms were kind of pretty to look at, like faceted gems or arrowheads. And given their myriad colors, well, they were honestly beautiful.

“Even though we’re in such a dangerous situation, there’s not much for me to do right now,” Elma mused.

“Me neither,” Mimi added. “There’s no way for me to support in a melee like this…”

The crystals’ shard-throwing didn’t make much of a dent in the *Krishna*’s shields, so there was no need to use a shield cell. And if we deployed chaff or ECMs in a mob like this, we would only draw their attention. Even Mimi had little to do, as I’d already pulled up my short-range and mid-range radars in my periphery. Heck, even if she tried to warn me of something, at this distance, it would be too late by the time it was out of her mouth. The ship’s near-field sensors would activate sooner than she could physically react.

“Get over here, you little…!” I finally passed through the wall of small and medium crystals and was now closing in on the large one.

The small ones still spawning from it and the medium ones I’d passed on my way here were all forming up behind me…but they were far too late.

“Fire!”

The anti-ship torpedo shot from the *Krishna*'s underside weapon deck and flew at high speed toward the enormous crystal life-form. These torpedoes were typically on the slower side, but since the *Krishna* itself was already sweeping forward at incredible speed, the inertia was added to the torpedo's velocity. The torpedo flew out at about the same speed as the *Krishna* itself.

Before the torpedo had even hit its mark, I had already turned the *Krishna* toward its next objective. A few seconds later, the torpedo burst into a glorious ball of fire behind us. In the back monitor, I could see not only the big crystal life-form, but also its smaller friends trapped in the explosion. They had no shields deployed, so when they shattered into shrapnel like that, they often ended up hurting their allies as well as their enemies.

"All right! On to the next one!"

"Yeah, yeah. I'll maintain our shields, so go wild."

"I'll report if there are too many enemies following us!"

After dropping the first big one with gusto, I skulked toward my next prey, elated. It was time to really make a mess of these guys.

***

The state of the battle wasn't good, though I wouldn't call it precisely bad, either. Both sides still had a chance to eke out a victory. Some of our vessels might end up devoured before the enemy was destroyed, but as long as the crystals didn't damage our outpost interceptor weapons, victory would eventually be within our grasp. However…

"The situation is becoming increasingly unmanageable."

"We still have time, but…"

"Not for long. What are our options here?"

The most pressing problem was that one of the ships at risk of being devoured was the battleship we stood on at this very moment, the *Lestarius*.

We had shields to spare for now, and our anti-air attacks were so far effective. Our carrier-borne aircraft pilots were fighting well, too. But hordes of crystal life-forms waited behind the ones we were currently engaging. We were at risk of getting swallowed by the waves of enemies. Even the *Lestarius*, the pride of the Imperial Fleet and its most cutting-edge battleship, wouldn't last long once submerged.

"In the worst case, Lieutenant Commander, you should use the escape pod—"

"An escape pod will not take me far without a shield. Furthermore, I refuse to evacuate before my crew—both as captain and as a member of imperial nobility."

This ship was in dire straits, but as a whole, the fleet was pushing back. If we could hold out, reinforcements might come. And if help came, this ship would be much more likely to survive.

"That said, without some sort of miracle…" I muttered. Just as the word left my mouth, I was contacted by the ship's communications operator.

"We've received word that a mercenary guild ship has come as backup!" he informed me.

"A mercenary? The mercenaries garrisoned at the base should be fighting at Point S-02, no?"

"This one's new! They arrived in a gunboat-type Skithblathnir mothership."

"Gunboat…? Their help is appreciated, but…" I didn't know what kind of firepower they had, but the Skithblathnir was a large—no, perhaps medium—Space Dwergr mothership. A helpful ally, indeed. "Have them take up position behind the *Lestarius* and provide covering fire," I ordered. "They'll fight off the small—"

Before I could finish, a beam of light streaked across our field of vision, directly striking the medium crystal we were targeting. It punched an enormous hole through the enemy, and the crystal's exterior immediately started to crumble and scatter into the vacuum of space.

"What was *that*?" I asked.

“The vessel that offered to support us is operating under the name *Black Lotus*. Perhaps that was them? It looked like a large EML railgun.”

“An EML? That’s quite the unusual weapon…though its power is awe-inspiring.”

“The railgun’s accuracy is low, so they aren’t formally endorsed by the fleet. There’s no point in power if you can’t hit the mark, after all.”

I hit a few button on my console and gazed at the *Black Lotus* on *Lestarius*’s photosensors. Its exterior was painted a deep blue, almost black. The color reminded me of a certain man’s ship. He had used a gateway to flee while guarding Count Dalenwald’s ship, so I’d had to give up pursuit… I wondered, was he doing well now?

“Incredible firepower, indeed,” I murmured.

“You can say that again. You don’t see a mercenary with a ship of that caliber every day.”

Plating slid back and the *Black Lotus* deployed hidden weapons, madly firing lasers and seeker missiles. Twelve laser cannons, ten missile pods, and an EML mounted on the ship’s bow… If these weapons were normally concealed, it was clear that the mercenaries aboard this ship meant to hide that they were heavily armed.

Hide from whom, though? Since it was a mercenary ship, they were clearly trying to hide their weapons from pirates. Pretending to be a transport ship, yet carrying the armory of a heavily armed gunboat… When pirates carelessly approached this lotus, they would find it to be a poisonous flower.

“Wait…” I muttered.

That man had taught us the very same bait tactic, and we’d learned it well. We’d even hired other mercenaries to observe and advise us. Those mercenaries had called the fleet “scary” and “underhanded” for using such a tactic—so was it not strange for that ship to be using the same tactic?

And the large EML on their bow was also exceedingly suspicious. As I recalled, that man’s ship also had a flak cannon used for extreme close-quarters combat. Both of these were similarly niche weapons.

“Find out everything you can about the owner of that ship,” I demanded.

“Huh? Wha—?!” My adjutant next to me gasped. “Right now?!”

Despite his protests, he was devoted to his work. He turned to his console and began searching the database.

“L-Lieutenant Commander!”

“Yes?”

“We’ve received a communication from the *Black Lotus*. Erm…”

“Report it immediately in full.”

“Er, I’m finding this hard to believe, but…they claim that a small mercenary battleship will plunge into the swarm and throw the enemy into disorder.”

The question in my mind gradually turned into conviction. There were only two idiots in this vast galaxy who would so easily do something so stupid.

“Lieutenant Commander?”

“It’s him, isn’t it?”

“Yes ma’am, it is him.”

I turned my eyes to the bridge’s main monitor. Several large crystal life-forms hung unmoving in the depths of the swarm. As I watched, one was half-destroyed in a flash of light. “The enemy forces are falling! Push them back!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

On my orders, the crew sprang into action. It seemed this man would save our lives today.

***

“Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit!”

“Ha ha ha! I’m not done yet! Let’s keep going!”

“Nononononono, we caaan’t!”

Elma and Mimi were crying, but I had every confidence we’d be fine. So many small crystals were chasing us that the radar display was almost solidly red—but that was within expectations.

“Gaaaah! Forward, forward!”

“Alley-oop!”

“Eep…”

Medium-sized crystal life-forms tried to block the *Krishna*’s path, but I weaved through with a hair’s breadth to spare, grazing past their gleaming forms and slipping between them. The small ones tried to chase me though the gap and slammed into the medium-sized ones and each other, creating a multi-crystal pile-up. This, too, was as expected.

“N-now what do we do?” Elma asked, regaining some of her composure.

“Hmm… Well, we did use up all our anti-ship torpedoes.”

Keeping an eye out so as not to get caught among the medium-sized ones, I smashed up a few small crystals with flak and pressed onward. I had dealt major damage to several of the large ones with anti-ship torpedoes, and their command structure was crumbling. That meant these little guys were free to attack as they pleased.

But I couldn’t think about that; the main thing was, I had to keep moving or I’d be crushed by sheer numbers. I continued pressing forward to draw their attention. Now all we could do was pray that the Imperial Fleet and the *Black Lotus* could clean them up for us.

“We just need to focus on escaping and whittle down their numbers while we hope for our allies’ success!”

“So your plan was to leave it to them?! That’s the same as no plan!”

“You might think so, but no. What I’ve done here is throw one side of an even battle into disarray. If the Imperial Fleet is worth their salt—”

Suddenly, several large-bore laser cannons fired lasers this way, obliterating in an instant the whole cloud of medium and small crystals I’d

been facing. “See? Now, we just have to zoom around and keep out of the way of the fleet’s fire.”

“Master Hiro! The Imperial Fleet is sending us data on their bombardment plans!”

“For real? Throw it up on the radar and HUD. I’ll lead the enemies right into it.”

“Yes, sir!”

Was Mei behind this? Even if she wasn’t, they had adapted to my interference almost too fast. It was almost as if they knew how I—

“Oh…oh no.” I shuddered.

“Hey! Get your head out of the clouds!”

“I know, I know. We’ll find out after we survive this.”

The face of a certain blonde-haired lieutenant commander surfaced in my mind…but the Pirate-Hunting Unit wouldn’t be deployed on the front lines against crystal life-forms, right? No, this must’ve all been Mei’s doing. After firmly convincing myself of that fact, I continued to sweep through the battlefield, dragging the train of crystal life-forms in my wake.

***

“Hoo boy, that was a thrill. I’m a little worried about how the reward will turn out, though.”

In the hour since my grand entrance, the crystal life-forms had been chased out of this sector. Once I broke the stalemate between the two forces, things had gone swimmingly for the garrison. Medium crystals were destroyed one after another. With their shielding vanguard eliminated, the already-damaged big ones were destroyed under the focused fire of the Imperial Fleet.

Normally, the big ones would continue spawning medium and small ones until they overcame the enemy, but four of their six here had been grievously damaged by my anti-ship reactive torpedoes. They were no

longer able to spawn more crystals, and the fleet overpowered them shortly after.

"I'm wiped…" said Elma. "I wanna take a nap."

"Me too…"

Elma and Mimi were beaten down. Mentally, that is. From my point of view, they'd just screamed and hollered for an hour for no reason since we were perfectly safe. But it must've been scary for them. I decided to graciously forgive their panic and subsequent exhaustion.

“What’s with the smug look?” Elma asked. “You wanna get hit?”

“Please no, I’m gonna die.”

Elma might look dainty, but she boasted gorilla-like strength. I’d arm-wrestled her once before, and she wrecked me. How could such slender arms hide such muscular domination? Maybe she was using magic to power herself up or something.

“That was the toughest battle yet…” Mimi sighed.

“Thrilling, right? One misstep, and bam! You’re history.”

“You’re way too calm about it!” Elma glared at me, but I’d always messed with crystal life-forms like this in *Stella Online*. Large-scale battles with them were a kind of raid, so I’d done it countless times. Playing chicken with flying crystals was basically muscle memory at this point. Still, in this world I couldn’t be overconfident, so I’d planned my moves with an ample margin of safety.

“Mimi, we’re docking in the *Black Lotus*.”

“Okay. I’ll contact Mei.”

As we made our way back to our mothership, I spotted a rather familiar battleship waiting next to it.

“Erm, Master Hiro? That battleship…” Mimi stammered.

“Ha ha ha! That’s a laugh. It must be the same model.”

“Confirmed. It’s the *Lestarius*,” said Mimi.

“Why?!”

How could such a big universe be such a small world? This sector shouldn’t be of interest to the Pirate-Hunting Unit. Also, I’d gone through a gateway; how could that lieutenant commander be here?

“Excuse me, Master Hiro?”

“Yeah?”

“We have a communication request from the *Lestarius*…”

“…Yeah.”

I couldn't refuse communications now. At the very least, I'd have to go through the fleet if I wanted to my reward. I had battle data, so they wouldn't refuse to pay me, but having the lieutenant commander's backing would ensure I got my payday.

"Greetings, Captain Hiro speaking." I greeted Serena.

"Long time no see, Captain Hiro. You certainly saved the day today."

"Thank you. I'm truly quite honored."

"Keep up the fake politeness and I'll make the rest of your life an unhappy one."

"Please no, I'm gonna die."

Elma and Lieutenant Commander Serena both had a way of threatening violence whenever I joked. It wasn't very friendly of them.

Yeah, yeah, I know I'm one to talk…but I mean, I don't use direct violence all that often. The most I've personally done is slap people with wads of bills…unless they started it.

Serena sighed. "Never mind. We'll need you to follow the *Lestarius* until we have the situation under control. We have your battle data, and you have my word that you'll be treated fairly."

"Aye aye. Do you need any help?"

"Not at all. You may rest in your mothership. If we need anything, we will contact the *Black Lotus*."

"Understood."

Elma and Mimi heaved a sigh of relief. They were both exhausted, so I decided I might as well be obedient.

"Aaall right, let's dock."

"Roger."

"Okay!"

I flew the *Krishna* into the *Black Lotus'* hangar. *She said we'll be treated fairly, but who knows how much I can trust her? I've got a bad feeling about this…*

Chapter 2:
Center Stage

I DOCKED IN THE *Black Lotus* and climbed down the *Krishna*'s ladder and onto the hangar deck, where the twins greeted me.

"Heya!"

"Welcome back!"

"Good to see you girls."

They were both wearing their mechanics' jumpsuits and had maintenance bots lined up behind them. It seemed they were ready to get cracking on the *Krishna* right away.

"Where are Elma and Mimi?"

"They're resting in their rooms on the *Krishna*. The battle took a bit of a mental toll on them."

"I can imagine…" Wiska looked up at the *Krishna* sympathetically.

"I didn't think it was that hazardous," I shrugged. "That was about the safest driving I could manage."

"You've got some screws loose, hon. No offense, but you're off your rocker."

"Am I that bad?"

"I'd say so…" Wiska agreed. "We watched the whole thing through the *Black Lotus*'s sensors. If you'd made a single misstep, you'd be a kebab on a crystal skewer."

"It's way easier to dodge those guys than it is to dodge laser beams." Lasers were practically unavoidable. Basically the only way to dodge them was to hide in their blind spots. Otherwise, your only options would be to block with your shields or let your plating take a beating.

"Why would you compare them to laser cannons… But anyway, that's not the point. Aren'tcha afraid of making that one tiny mistake and biting the dust?"

“Hmm…I guess I can’t say I have no fear at all, but it’s more a question of how accustomed you are to it.”

“Accustomed?”

“Yep. I’m used to that level of risk, so I’m fine.”

That was all I could say, really. It would be a lie to say I wasn’t scared of making one fatal misstep, but you could say it’s a lot like driving a car back on Earth. One wrong turn of the wheel on a mountain road and you could break through a guardrail and wind up upside down at the bottom of a ravine.

“Huh…” Tina shrugged. “Well, anyway, we’re gonna get to fixin’ up the *Krishna*.”

“Yeah, thanks. The hull hasn’t sustained any damage, so I figure it should only need maintenance on the suspension, generator, and shield generator.”

“More or less. But knowin’ the enemy, we’re gonna give it the full inspection.”

“Fair. Safety first and all. If you find any shards of crystal on there, make sure you don’t touch them with your bare hands.”

“Yeah, duh. I don’t wanna be a crystal sculpture.”

I wanted them to be as careful as possible, but maybe I was being a little overprotective. The maintenance bots would do most of the work, in any case. It really was convenient to be able to have the *Krishna* maintained right here without needing to stop at a port, even if our cargo capacity limited what materials we could carry for repairs.

I watched the girls and their maintenance pods for a while before heading to the *Black Lotus*’s bridge.

“Welcome back, Master,” Mei greeted me.

“Hey. How are things here?”

“The Imperial Fleet is removing any remaining crystal life-forms. They are also recovering their remains.”

“That must be a lot.”

“Indeed, but it would be dangerous to cut corners.”

“I’ll say.”

Crystal life-form corpses were valuable. Their rare crystals could be used as material for laser cannon lenses, as an energy source, and some other things. However, it was extremely dangerous to touch living ones carelessly. If you touched one bare-handed, it could infiltrate and steal away your whole arm.

And if enough living crystals combined together, they could start acting as crystal life-forms again. Because of this, the Imperial Fleet recovered the corpses, harvested only the valuable parts, and burned the unnecessary and living parts away with lasers.

How would the loot here be distributed? Would it be used to pay the soldiers, or would it be added to the military’s budget? Not that any of that was really my concern.

“Looks like it’ll be a while,” I mused.

“I would estimate around two hours.”

“Rough work for those military men and women. I’d really like to drop the cargo and leave, but…”

“I have informed Lieutenant Commander Serena about the cargo delivery as well. I expect we will receive communications soon.”

***

We created a report based on the *Krishna*’s battle data, as well as the data recorded between the *Black Lotus* and *Lestarius*, and sent it to headquarters. We included a note that we would pay out special rewards to the *Krishna* and *Black Lotus*.

When we received a response, it contained only one word: “Psycho.”

The report was shared to all squadron commanders in the Izulux System, and they all responded in much the same vein. I could see why they thought so, but that was just the way he was.

“I noticed the big ones getting destroyed and the whole swarm turning weird. So this guy was behind it all?”

“Can we even use this battle data for anything?”

“You want us to analyze it and use it to counter the enemy? Machine intelligence might be able to use it, but I’m sure they’d refuse. Crystal life-forms’ assimilation is fatal to machine intelligence, and they’re certainly not lacking a sense of self-preservation.”

“We can’t prepare such a specialized ship anyway, and it would be a suicide attack machine even if we did.”

“Well I say it’s better than a useless suppression ship.”

“Can you quit grumbling about that? More bloodthirsty nobles might cut you down.”

The suppression ship discussion was indeed a dangerous one. I wasn’t that brutish, but some nobles among the fleet had itchy saber hands.

“I believe it would be in our best interest to simply accept the victory handed to us and pay out a suitable reward,” I said to the group.

A few people agreed with my assessment.

“One should always reward good deeds. We must pay out the appropriate reward for this service.”

“By our own analysis, the mercenary’s work was a major factor in our victory. I am in full agreement.”

“We must accept the truth; anyone can tell who won us the day. I will inform Accounting.”

“Thank you all.” With this, I had fulfilled my promise to him. I could breathe a sigh of relief…for now.

“Will he remain at our base for the time being?”

“I wonder,” I replied. “I’ve been informed that he’s here on a transport request.”

“Keep him here if you can. We need all the firepower we can get right now.”

“I’ll try, but…” They had tasked me with the impossible. I’d tried so many times by now to seduce him to our side, but he never budged an inch. I could only think of one way to tie him down. “If we really want to keep him here, then I’ll need assistance.”

***

We spent an hour of watching the Imperial Fleet hard at work from the *Black Lotus*'s bridge before Lieutenant Commander Serena contacted us from the *Lestarius*. I faced her once again through the holo-display.

"I've convinced base command and the other commanding officers. You can expect a hefty reward for your assistance in this matter."

"Excellent. I would've been heartbroken if we'd been stiffed for this one. Oh, by the way, can I get my ammunition replenished? I've got my heart set on four anti-ship reactive torpedoes."

"I believe we have some reserves for torpedo ships, so I'll see what we can do. The Imperial Fleet will naturally bear the cost of replacing your ammunition."

"I appreciate that, but…" I hesitated. *Isn't she being a little too sweet and accommodating right now? I mean, I did snatch the fleet's victory from the jaws of defeat, so maybe this is normal…? Either way, alarm bells are going off in my head.*

"The ammunition request has been approved; we will need you to dock at the outpost. Our accounting department will contact you soon regarding the rewards."

"Thanks…? Hey, are you plotting something here?"

"No."

I couldn't get a read on her. I knew from experience that this woman was a real mess when she got drunk, but when she was in uniform, she was a perfect, poker-faced military officer. Mei might be able to perceive some minute changes in her expression and glean some insight, but I was not equipped with such skills.

After a few moments of silence, I finally said, "Well, I graciously accept your kindness. We'll move the *Black Lotus* to the outpost now."

"Good. The crystal life-form attack warning has been lifted, but please do be careful on your way."

“Roger that. Oh, y’know, we happen to have some nice dwarven ale in the hold. Unrelated to the transport request. Can we sell it here?”

“We happen to be running low on luxury items, so I imagine you’ll get a good price for it. Why, I might even purchase some myself.”

“Don’t go overboard.”

“Of course not.” Lieutenant Commander Serena’s lips twitched. She must’ve been recalling what she did in the Arein System. She still owed me, though I guess this counted as one returned favor. Although if you think about it, maybe I’d done her a favor here?

“All right. You take care as well.”

“Indeed. Goodbye.” Serena cut off the call.

“Well, what do you think?” I asked Mei.

“I believe she wants to keep you on the outpost and exploit your strength, Master.”

“I think you’re right.”

If she paid me enough, I’d gladly accept. The military were sure to cough up what they owed, after all. But would they shove all their annoying troubles onto me after the showstopping performance I’d put on? There were things even I couldn’t do for them. Like if they told me to face a whole swarm on my own, I’d have to refuse. But they probably knew there were limits, too, so I doubted they would try that.

“Well, it’s fine with me,” I shrugged. “As long as they don’t ask me to do anything too insane.”

“I believe that having more military connections will make working in imperial territory easier.”

“Absolutely. Let’s give it a go.”

In *Stella Online*, there was a kind of mission called a faction quest—basically, you could receive quests from factions like militaries or large corporations. Those quests would raise factions’ opinion of you and, and they would offer you certain benefits. If you played as a mercenary, you would naturally end up forming a good relationship with the military, since they were the ones paying out rewards for pirate exterminations.

When the military liked you, you would get more quests involving hunting and extermination, receive discounts on ammunition and supplies, gain access to military-grade weapons that most players couldn't obtain, and even get weapons for free from time to time. Military factions had great synergy with mercenary players. Of course, getting buddy-buddy with one country's military meant being pegged as an enemy by hostile countries and pacifist organizations, so it wasn't all sunshine and roses.

"And it goes beyond game bonuses, too…"

That was what *SOL* could offer, but I wasn't totally clear on how a relationship with the military would affect me in this world. It went without saying, but this world wasn't a video game. I might end up in some very unique, very annoying situations.

"I just pray we aren't getting ourselves into trouble," I said.

"I agree, although I'm not certain your prayers will be of much help."

So basically, you think we're guaranteed to run into trouble?

Honestly, I could see her point. We'd come here on a transport request, and there just *happened* to be a crystal life-form attack on arrival. And we just *happened* to be reunited with a certain lieutenant commander. Of course something was going to go down here. We would have to be cautious.

***

We docked at the Imperial Fleet's outpost without issue. Was it because word had already gotten around? Or because I'd mentioned the liquor on board to the Port Authority? Or was it simply because Space Dwergr's new weaponry in our cargo hold was just that important to them? Well, I didn't worry too much about the why; I was just glad that we were able to avoid a long wait.

"There's not much for us to do, huh?" I mused.

"Yeah…" Elma agreed with a sigh.

Elma and I relaxed in the *Black Lotus*'s lounge. Mimi and Mei were currently reporting on our transport request and selling the luxury items we'd brought, so we were idle for the moment.

The twins were currently occupied performing maintenance on the *Krishna* and *Black Lotus*. After the *Krishna*'s wild maneuvers and the *Black Lotus*'s nonstop fire as a backup gunship, they were taking a close look at the weapons.

"If you're tired, you can sleep for a while," I offered.

"Mmm… I think I'll take you up on that." Elma leaned on my shoulder and soon dropped off. *Hey, I said you could sleep. You don't have to do it right on me… Not that I have anywhere else to be, I guess.*

While Elma got some shut-eye, I used my handheld terminal for a little intelligence gathering. Mei was doing a bang-up job at it, but I couldn't leave everything to her; it was still important to gather and interact with this stuff myself.

I first tried poking around for info regarding the war against crystal life-forms. It seemed the aliens sporadically assaulted this base. The conflicts gradually grew in scale, and now there were reports that the empire was transferring their forces to this star system in order to defend it. At the same time, they were trying to pinpoint where the crystal life-forms were spawning from. So far, they had failed to locate it.

But wasn't that a little strange? As far as I knew, crystal life-forms had set spawn points. They usually holed up in star systems with pulsars. I didn't understand the minutiae, but basically, they fed off these stars' radio waves or x-rays or whatever, then infiltrated and reproduced on nearby asteroids.

There had been many updates after the addition of crystal life-forms in *Stella Online*, and pretty much the whole player base had carried out investigations, quests, and defensive quests related to them. Ultimately, we figured out the biology of the crystals. That was when I started playing as a mercenary, so I had mostly fought off crystal life-forms and retaken star systems that had fallen under their control. The explorer players were the ones to thank for our current level of knowledge about their inner workings.

“Has research on crystal life-forms not progressed much in this universe?” I muttered to nobody in particular.

It wasn’t inconceivable. Although this world was similar to *Stella Online*, it wasn’t entirely the same. My knowledge from the game wasn’t all applicable, though some of it was. For example, I knew what kinds of materials a star system producing particular items might need. Ships I encountered here that had appeared in-game also had the same specs I remembered, so that hadn’t changed much, either.

But there were smaller shipmakers and other elements in this universe that hadn’t appeared in the game. For example, Maidroids like Mei didn’t exist in *Stella Online*, and I don’t think there were any hints of machine intelligence back when I was a player. When I thought about it, there were countless small discrepancies like that.

I decided to set the mysteries of this universe aside for now and used my handheld terminal to activate the lounge’s holo-display, bringing up the Galaxy Map and displaying the area around the Izulux System. *The closest pulsar system to Izulux would be…this one, I guess? And maybe this one…*

I was still checking for neighboring pulsar systems when I heard the call tone blaring from my terminal. Elma was still snoring on my shoulder, and I didn’t want to wake her up, so I quickly accepted the call without even reading the caller’s name.

“My, you picked up fast… Were you waiting for my call?” Lieutenant Commander Serena joked with a grin.

“No,” I replied shortly, and turned my terminal to show her Elma slumped against me. When I turned the screen back, her smile had turned stiff.

“Enjoy showing off your conquests, do you?”

“That’s not what I meant. I’m just saying someone is trying to sleep here. Also, I just picked up right away because I was already using my terminal. How can I help you, Lieutenant Commander?”

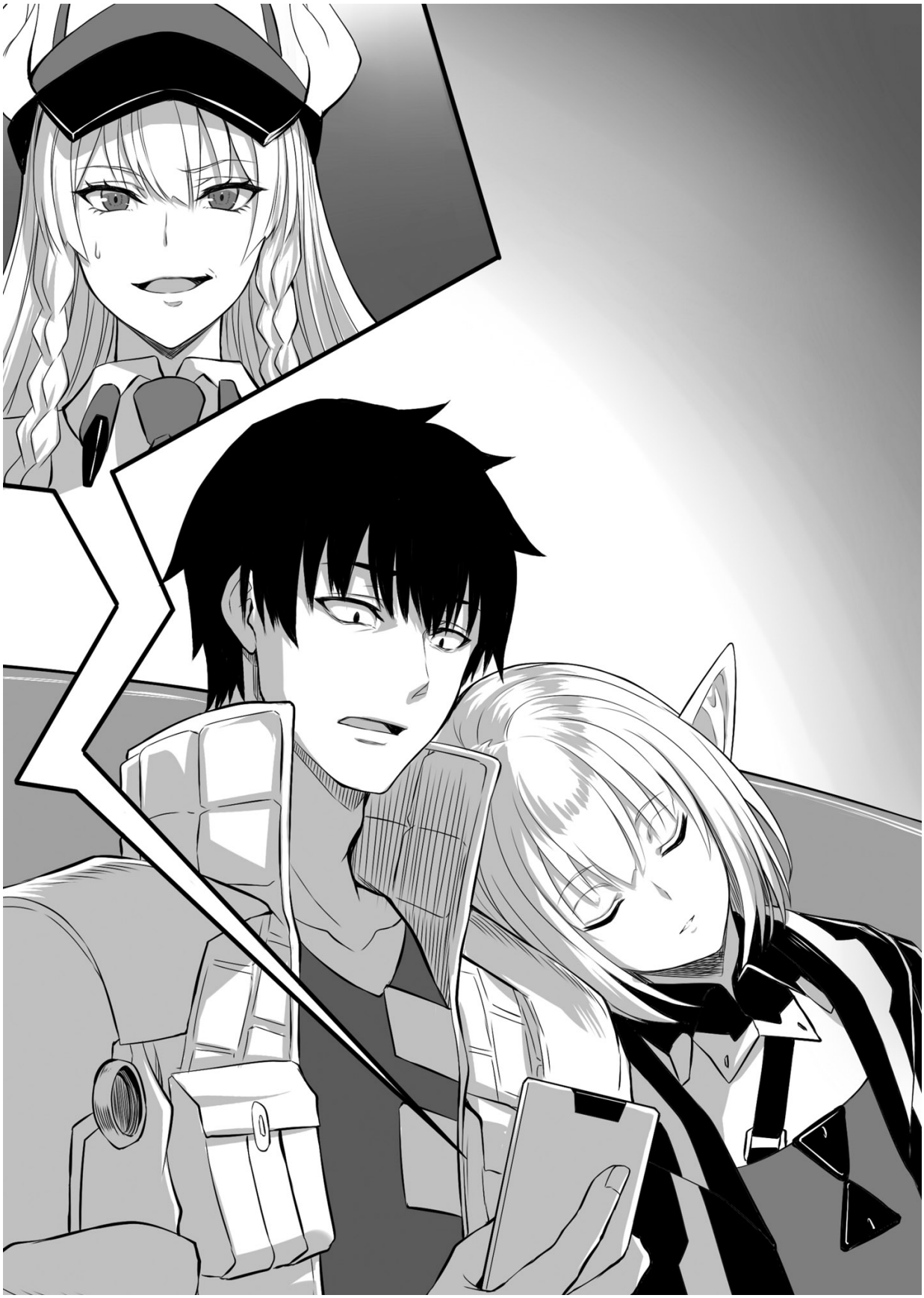
“Let’s get down to business then. I have a request.”

“Related to the crystals, I presume.”

“I’m glad you’re quick on the uptake.” She smiled again. “I’ll get to the point: I would like you and your ships to participate as mercenaries in any coming battles. We are asking to retain you for thirty days at minimum, ninety at maximum.”

“I’d really rather not be stuck here.”

“Of course you have the right to refuse. You are a free mercenary, not a military man. It is impossible for us to restrict your movement for our own purposes. Besides, we must be considerate of the mercenary guild.”



“I see. And how about the reward?” That was the biggest factor here.

“We are currently calculating your reward. I can’t give you any hard numbers, but you may assume it will be quite a large sum.”

“Okay. Then I’ll decide when I see the reward and get the exact details of the request.”

I didn’t come cheap. When all was said and done, my power was limited, and there were significant risks involved. I couldn’t fight off a huge swarm of crystals without the empire’s support, and I didn’t want them thinking I could. And most importantly, the lives of Elma, Mimi, and the dwarves were in my hands. I would never carelessly take on any request that put them in harm’s way.

“I expected you would say that,” Serena responded. “I simply wanted to inform you ahead of time that we intend to request your support. Of course, as this is a direct request from us, we will compensate you in more than just Ener.”

“Such as?”

“We are prepared to provide you with military-grade weaponry. Naturally, though, there are some limits on what we can offer.”

“That is an attractive proposition…” I was especially attracted by the part where I wouldn’t have to grind faction missions to get access to the good stuff. It’d kill me if I had to do a whole list of annoying missions just to get my hands on some powerful weapons.

“Isn’t it? Please consider it seriously.”

“I’ll think about it.” As enticing as it was, I couldn’t give her my word on the spot. No matter how brightly she smiled. “Rewards aside, what exactly am I being asked to do? So it’s related to crystal life-forms—that doesn’t give me much to go on.”

“Specifically, we are asking you to search for the system where they’re spawning. The military has sent recon missions to neighboring star systems, so your job would be to join those missions and protect our personnel from crystal attacks.”

“I see…”

Recon missions, huh? They must not know the crystals make nests in pulsar systems. If they did, they wouldn't waste all this time and effort. Well, it's not a total waste; crystals do reproduce by moving to neighboring systems. They'll have to be thorough if they want to wipe them out for good.

But in my experience, if you couldn't take down the Mother Crystal right away, most nests became an endless mob-killing battle.

"Is something wrong?" Serena asked me.

"Oh, no. It's just that I heard a rumor that crystal life-forms typically nest in star systems with pulsars." Her expression changed immediately. Well, that was expected; anyone would be stunned if they had that kind of information dropped in their lap. Knowing this would change everything about their ongoing search.

"Is that true?" she asked gravely. "Where did you hear this?"

"Like I said, just a rumor. I honestly couldn't say where I heard it."

If I told her I learned it from a video game I'd played in my old world, she'd think I was a lunatic. Plus I wasn't even certain it held true here, so I didn't want to appear too confident. The best I could do was make it clear that it was an off-hand remark and hopefully give her a useful lead.

"My unit will be sent out soon as well."

"W-wow. Come to think of it, why is your Pirate-Hunting Unit here in the first place? Your whole thing is *hunting pirates*, isn't it?"

"Our flagship *Lestarius* is among the newest of all imperial ships. The cruisers that make up the backbone of our forces excel in striking, as well. Given our quick footwork and our readiness for long journeys, we were a logical choice."

"So you gracefully allowed them to drag you out here."

"It is not our original purpose, but it means protecting the safety of the imperial citizens who live in nearby star systems. We also cannot turn our backs on our comrades in the service."

"Uh-huh." It seemed military people had a lot of obligations to look after. Serena was also some sort of noble, so I guess that probably factored into it as well.

“Well, you have your request,” she said. “I hope you’ll accept it.”

“I’ll discuss it with my crew.”

Nice try. You can smile all you want, but I’m not giving you my word that easily.

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“Morning…” Elma grumbled.

“Hey. Wanna go wash your face?”

“Sure…” She yawned and stumbled out of the lounge.

Serena had always been a tough negotiator, but she’d dragged me into trouble once before—you could say I’d learned my lesson. I’d managed to avoid giving any concrete answers and hung up, saying I had “stuff to do.” I still hadn’t wanted to wake Elma, though, so I’d opened my messaging app and checked in on Mimi, Mei, and the twins.

They’d completed the transport request and collected our 1.5 million Ener reward for the delivery. It was a hefty reward for mere transport, but our destination was a dangerous outpost, and we’d gotten here fast. On the other hand, they reported that at the merchant guild had laughed at us for getting embroiled in a fight while carrying valuable cargo.

And hey, they had me there! It hadn’t been too risky since the *Black Lotus* had just been firing at long range and had been under the protection of the Imperial Fleet, but I resolved to be more careful from now on. If I remembered, anyway.

Unfortunately for the merchant guild, mercenary work was our main gig. Fighting meant rewards, and if I felt it was safe to fight, I’d go for it. I wasn’t about to let a prime money-making opportunity slip away. If they felt they couldn’t trust us with their goods, then I didn’t mind going back to selling our own spoils.

Working as a courier was easy money, but that was its only upside; if you wanted to pursue raw profits, then making your own sales was the way to go.

Besides, we completed the request in time, so I didn't see how anyone could complain. *Should I report this to the mercenary guild and Space Dwergr, too?*

When I sent a message along those lines to the merchant guild, they replied: "Rest assured; we have every confidence in you. We only reported the common opinion. Please continue to take our requests when they suit you. No need to send a report to the mercenary guild or Space Dwergr."

Had they underestimated us since I'd left negotiations to Mimi? *Seems like there are troublemakers all over.*

I chatted about it with the girls on our messaging app.

You're scary, hon! Tina's message came with a sticker showing a character with a red wrench motif quivering in fear.

Elma chimed in. *If people start underestimating you, your life as a mercenary is over. If we'd ignored that fight, dropped the cargo, and made a run for it, other mercenaries would look down on us.* This time, there was a sticker of a funny-looking cyclops alien nodding in understanding. It seemed Elma was participating in our conversation while she washed her face. Maybe she was brushing her teeth, too?

Mercenary work sure does come with a lot of difficulties. Another sticker displayed a character with a blue hammer peeking around a wall. That was probably Wiska's, but the way it was all bulky and macho was kind of creepy. Why did she choose *that* one?

Ugh…I've caused Master Hiro trouble… Finally, I saw a sticker that looked like a weird, sad cat-squirrel hybrid thing. I can't really describe it better because that's…basically as good as any description gets. It might look a little more acceptable if it had glasses on; why not try putting some fake glasses on it? Then it might look like a capable secretary, or something… *Nah, I doubt that'll happen. Mimi would just end up making it cute somehow.*

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“Don’t get too down about it,” I reassured Mimi. “Just brush it off with a smile and work on being more firm with them next time.”

“Okay…”

“Besides, we made a tidy profit off selling the stuff we filled our unused space with. You did good, kid.”

“…Okay!”

In fact, the alcohol and other luxury items we’d brought in flew off the shelves. People snapped them up the second we put them on the market, and we were out of stock in the blink of an eye. Our take-home was 330,000 Ener from those sales alone. Mimi and I had settled on a 3 percent commission for her, so she would make 9,900 Ener, while my cut was about 320,000.

We also decided to divvy up our 1.5 million Ener shipping reward the same way we did for normal rewards, so Mimi got 15,000 Ener, Elma walked away with 45,000, and my remainder would be 1.44 million.

That left me with a total of 1.76 million Ener. From there, we would subtract ship maintenance fees, docking fees, and living expenses. Docking fees were especially steep. Since the *Black Lotus* was much bigger than the *Krishna*, it cost exponentially more to dock.

The dwarf twins received no cut from this, by the way. Their bonuses only came from profits from harvested pirate ships and parts, which they did the bulk of the work on.

“And as for the lieutenant commander’s—well, the Imperial Fleet’s request…” I said to the girls.

“Depends on the reward, right?” Elma asked.

“It always comes down to that, doesn’t it. I don’t believe we’ve received word yet. Right, Mei?” I turned to the Maidroid, who stood behind me.

“Correct. No word from the Imperial Fleet yet.”

So we were still waiting on the Imperial Fleet’s accounting department. “Does this kind of thing usually take so long?”

“I presume they are having difficulties due to the lack of precedent.”

“Lack of precedent? Surely it’s not uncommon for a mercenary to jump into an Imperial Fleet battle and squeeze them for a reward.”

It was routine for mercenary players to jump into warring sectors, join the side of the current owner of that star system, and try to reel in a big haul. When I’d started out in *SOL*, I had done just that to afford equipment and ship upgrades.

“Master, I believe the problem is exactly how *much* you contributed to the battle. The fact is, your suicidal attacks turned a stalemate into a one-sided victory for the Imperial Fleet.”

“Suicidal? C’mon now.”

I hadn’t been *that* reckless. That was an example of safe driving backed by hard-won experience. I mean, sure, I’d caused my fair share of disasters in *SOL* until I’d gotten the hang of it, but… Come to think of it, if the people of this universe wanted to match my maneuvers, they’d have to put themselves in peril countless times. In this universe, exploding in the middle of a horde of crystal life-forms meant instant death.

“You half or fully destroyed four large crystals, greatly inhibiting the enemy’s ability to bolster their numbers. You also obliterated countless small and medium crystals, drawing their attention and giving the Imperial Fleet time to organize and fire. The fleet would have suffered great losses if the situation had remained unchanged, but you prevented that. Frankly, I would not be surprised if you were decorated or granted a title.”

“Come again? What was that last bit?”

“I would not be surprised if you were decorated or granted a title.”

“…Can I pretend I didn’t hear that?”

I would gladly take a decoration that came with a yearly salary, but I did *not* want a title. That would only lead to trouble. Suddenly, the image of a cute, young black-haired girl with a big smile came to mind.

I didn’t hate Chris or anything, but being an imperial noble would lead to a whole lot of annoying responsibilities. The image of Serena and Chris pulling on me in a heated tug-of-war match came to mind as well.

Between the military might of Marquess Holz and the decline of Count Dalenwald, the former would probably be better, but Chris and I had

slept in the same bed before. I hadn't actually *done* anything, but knowing that father of hers, if he got wind of it, he'd probably threaten me into taking responsibility.

Come to think of it, Lieutenant Commander Serena had been aboard my ship before as well. But that was her own fault for forcing her way on board and getting blackout drunk, so it didn't count. If she tried to get on my case about it, I was more than ready to make sure the video file I'd backed up onto the *Krishna* went viral.

"If you think about your goal, wouldn't a title be most convenient?" Mimi asked.

"His goal?" Tina raised an eyebrow.

"He wants to buy a detached home with a yard on a terrestrial planet and live a free, leisurely life."

"That's a lofty goal," Wiska mused. "But I see… A noble title *would* give you landowner rights."

"An orbital colony is one thing, but a terrestrial planet?" asked Tina. "That means you're gonna need landowner rights. And purchasing *those* costs a whole mess of money. Maybe ya should become a noble, after all?"

The twins were right. To build a detached home on a terrestrial planet, I would need landowner rights. If I were knighted, I would automatically become a first-class citizen with such rights, and that would make building my home much cheaper.

"A title would bring me a lot closer to my goal, but… No! I haven't made my decision yet! There's no point in worrying about that now!"

"Captain, it's important to face reality…"

"If it's not in front of my eyes, it's not reality. It's silly to get all worked up over hypotheticals, right? Besides, Serena knows I have no desire to be tied down. She should be able to figure out that being too pushy over it will only grind my gears."

"Actually, I agree with the Master Hiro." Mimi sided with me.

If things got too complicated, I was ready to book it. I wasn't about to give up my leisurely, free-spirited mercenary life. Though I would happily take any decorations that didn't come with strings attached.

“What a waste… If ya can be a noble, I say go for it.” Tina shook her head.

“Rising from commoner to nobility is every ordinary imperial citizen’s dream success story,” Wiska added.

The twins spoke as if it were something awesome, but was noble status really so great? People might treat you better for it, but it also came with responsibilities. I doubted it could be better than the carefree life of a mercenary.

“I’m not a high-society guy, so hobnobbing with nobility isn’t my thing,” I answered.

“It’s not like you have to be a socialite just because you’re a noble,” Elma said. “Especially in the case of knights, real nobles just treat you like you’re still half a commoner.”

“Well, it’d piss me off if people looked down on me, too. Besides, I’ve got plans: I’m going to be a top-tier platinum-rank mercenary.”

“What exactly are you planning to do…? Also, what’s your beef with being noble? Do you have some weird trauma?” Tina asked.

“Weird trauma… Not really, it just sounds like a pain. It’s not for me.”

“You might actually like it if you try?” Tina urged me.

“Ugh…no, no. No more of this. Done! Stop.”

“Aww.” She stuck out her bottom lip in a pout. *Are you teasing me now? I’ll remember this.*

“Ah!” Mimi gasped, interrupting our exchange. “We’ve received a communication from the Imperial Fleet accounting department via the mercenary guild.”

“Ooh, good timing! What did they say?”

“Umm… They say that the actions of your ship and crew greatly reduced enemy numbers and saved the lives of many soldiers. In recognition of your efforts, they offer three million Ener as a reward, along with the Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge.”

“Well, ‘Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge’ doesn’t mean a thing to me, but I do like the sounds of three million Ener. Very easy to understand.” I didn’t know enough to judge whether that was an adequate amount, but it sure was a lot of money. That would be around 300 million yen, so…pretty crazy, right? Though probably not enough to live a pampered life of all play and no work.

“Wait, shouldn’t you be more surprised by the Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge?” Elma protested.

“Those are just a bunch of words to me… Is it really that big of a deal? It sounds fancy, I guess.”

I was curious about the design. Maybe it was a silver sword with a wing-shaped cross guard or something? Or would it be like a tank with sword wings?

“It is precisely as Miss Mimi said,” Mei explained. “The badge is awarded to those who have saved the lives of soldiers and contributed greatly in battle. According to the database, they are given out in the Grakkan Empire once every twelve years and seven months on average. You would be the seventeenth person to receive it.”

“I see…huh? What about the Tarmein—oh, wait. I guess that wouldn’t count.”

I’d performed about as well back in the Tarmein System, but that had been with the aid of an illegally used Singing Crystal. Honoring me for my exploits there would be tantamount to admitting that the Imperial Fleet had used a Singing Crystal as a method of slaughter—and they definitely couldn’t do that.

“So, does it come with any perks?” I asked Mei.

“The recipient has the same status as a knight, and is therefore equal to a noble in the eyes of the Grakkan Empire. Though it is more of an honorary title; you will not have hereditary rights.”

That was fine; I didn’t want or need such a thing. The Imperial Fleet really was desperate to put a collar on me.

“Turn that frown upside down,” Elma said. “It’s fine. You’re not gonna be a *real* noble. Oh, and it comes with a stipend, y’know.”

“Indeed. 150,000 Ener per year for the rest of your life,” Mei added.

“That’s not much… Kinda crappy, right?” I mean, 150,000 Ener couldn’t even satisfactorily upgrade a starting zabuton. Lame.

“It’s not crappy at all!” cried Tina.

“Your sense of value is all out of whack—150,000 Ener a year is enough to live on! You’d never need to work again!” Wiska backed her up.

Wiska and Tina’s objections were logical. *Fair… Yeah, I guess that’s true. The twins have the most normal money sense in this universe, after all. Fifteen million yen per year sounds like the lap of luxury, to be honest.*

“If I accept this…it won’t force any weird restrictions on me, will it?” I asked them.

“I don’t believe there’s anything to worry about.”

“If you say so, Mei, then I guess it’s fine. Mimi, reply and say that I graciously accept the honor.”

“U-understood…” Mimi replied, tense. She began tapping out a message on her tablet.

Our reward was ample, and now it was time to see about that new request. At this rate, I could expect big things.

Chapter 3:
Captain "Psycho" Hiro

THE DAY AFTER Mimi sent my response, the Imperial Fleet issued a summons. I would need to report to the Imperial Fleet's B-3 block on the outpost for a simple award ceremony.

"If I knew I'd have to go to a ceremony, I would have told them to keep the award…"

We were in the *Black Lotus*'s dining hall. With our cargo handed over and all the administrative crap finally dealt with, we had gathered here for a celebration of sorts. Well, not all of us; Mei wasn't joining. She'd said she had some "business" to attend to, but who knew what that meant?

"You're weirdly stubborn about this." Elma furrowed her brow and gazed at me searchingly. In her hand was a metallic jug.

Apparently, it was a high-tech jug that kept alcohol at the perfect temperature. I'd decided not to ask how much it set her back, but maaaybe she could think about repaying some of her debt soon? Although…not paying it gave us an excuse to stay together, so I wasn't going to push her about it.

"Now that you mention it, it is a little rare for Master Hiro to be this against something."

"Oh please. I bet if they were puttin' you in charge or strokin' your ego, you'd be glad to go along with it!"

"Umm…"

Mimi and Elma cocked their heads at once; Tina had said something oddly rude. What kind of person did she think I was, exactly? *And Wiska, you don't have to force yourself to back her up.*

"No particular reason, but I just…don't like it," I answered. "Maybe it's because Serena's involved."

"Can't help that."

"We certainly can't blame you."

Elma and Mimi agreed in no time.

“Right?” I said.

“I’m actually startin’ to become interested in this *Serena* y’all talk about so much.”

“Sis, I think we’d best keep our distance. Just a feeling…” Wiska was sharp. *A wise man sees danger and avoids it…* Not that I knew if the same proverb existed in this universe.

“Either way, now that we told them that you’ll accept, we have no choice,” Mei said, entering the dining hall.

“Yeeeah…fine. I’ll go,” I sighed and turned to face her. “Hm? Why did you bring those in here?”

She held a pair of sheathed swords, one large and one small. She wasn’t pointing them at us or anything; she was just holding them in her hands. She was also carrying some kind of belt.

I’d received those swords after Mei and I beat the hell out of an irritating noble together. Or more accurately, a certain scary old man—the father of said noble—had bequeathed them to me afterward.

“I believe it would be best if you wore these during the ceremony. I shall accompany you as well.”

“O-oh?!”

What the hell is she thinking?! In the Grakkan Empire, swords were the symbol of nobility. There was no law against commoners having them, but normal people didn’t carry swords, as there were some nobles out there who took issue with the unwashed masses imitating them. If they caught sight of you, they might challenge you to a duel and cut you down.

“I don’t want any scary nobles challenging me to duels,” I protested.

“You needn’t worry, Master. It would be best for an honorary knight with the Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge to carry a sword.”

“Is that how it works?” I asked Elma.

“Hmm…well, I guess?” She seemed hesitant.

“I seriously don’t know,” I said. “Explain it to me clearly instead of beating around the bush, please.”

“I don’t know much about it, either—but having the swords gives you a chance to bring up Count Dalenwald, right? Besides, Mei is machine intelligence. This country’s nobles might act weird about them in public, but they won’t push too hard against machines. In other words, she’ll act as a check on Serena.”

“So…she’s trouble-repellant?”

“I think so. Isn’t that right?”

Mei nodded wordlessly in response. *Okay…she’s trouble-repellant. Then I’ll take the swords, I suppose.* I accepted the swords from Mei and hung them at my hip. *Wow, they’re pretty heavy.*

“Should I always walk around with these from now on?”

“Once you’ve received the Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge, perhaps that would be best. You will be honorary nobility within the Grakkan Empire at that point.”

“They won’t attract any trouble either?”

“Not as long as you hold the Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge. In fact, it is my belief that not carrying the swords under these circumstances would be more likely to attract trouble.”

“That badge is a bigger deal than I thought…”

“Indeed. It is extremely rare for a living person to receive it.”

Wait, what?

“Normally, Silver-Winged and Silver Sword Badges are awarded for great and conspicuous exploits in battle. The Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge, however, is awarded only to those who charge into the fray alone, going above and beyond the call of duty—typically dying in the process.”

“What happens if a living person has it, then?”

“People will believe you are a deeply bloodthirsty person who should be maintained as an ally at all costs,” Elma chimed in.

“Like a double-edged sword?”

“Why would anyone want a double-edged sword?”

Ooh, now there's the comeback I've been waiting for! Thank you, Elma. I'll treat you to some nice juice later. Or I guess you'd prefer liquor, huh?

"So you're saying…people who *don't* know about the Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge will see the swords and think I'm a big deal, while people who *do* know about it will be too terrified to pick a fight."

"I would say that is accurate, if a bit blunt," confirmed Mei.

"Maybe I should back out, after all…?" I was getting cold feet.

"You cannot."

"Figures."

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I tried to convince Mimi and Elma to come with us, but they refused because I was the one being honored with the award. Meanwhile, the twins refused because they still felt like outsiders to our little group. In the end, only Mei accompanied me to the B-3 block's ceremonial venue.

Two swords hung at my hip. That alone made me conspicuous; add Mei's presence, and a lot of eyes were focused on me. I mean, they were probably just staring at my beautiful Maidroid. That had to be it…or at least I tried to convince myself it was.

"Guess I should start learning swordplay, too," I muttered.

"If you wish, Master. I can teach you as much as you'd like."

"How about we start with the basics, then?"

It would be pretty lame if I couldn't use swords I carried around all the time. Apparently you can't just swing wildly and expect results. I'd read in some book that if you didn't have real technique, swords were essentially just blunt weapons. But maybe they were easier to use in this universe? They were far sharper here, at least.

"Of course. Please leave it to me." Mei sounded a little more cheerful than usual. She must've been excited to teach me. Though if she used her

specs to the fullest, I'd be a red smear on the wall in no time. Hopefully she knew how to hold back.

While I tried to figure out a way to tell Mei to go easy on me, we walked steadily toward our destination. It seemed several other awards were being given here today, and there was a bit of a crowd in front of the room. I surveyed the people gathered as I approached.

At first glance, they mostly seemed like military people, but there were mercenaries interspersed throughout as well. Nobody had brought a Maidroid like I had, though. Maybe that was to be expected. Were they not as popular as I'd thought?

A young mercenary near the back of the crowd noticed me and looked my way. He was clearly sizing me up. I wordlessly looked him up and down right back.

He was a young man. I couldn't tell his exact age from his chiseled features, but he didn't look much older than me. On his hip was a laser gun, and…something else. Either a sheath or a pouch with a weapon inside. He wore sturdy-looking pants, a shirt, and a jacket. The designs were different, but the outfit itself was pretty much the same as mine. Yeah, this guy was definitely a merc.

"Whaddaya lookin' at?" he sneered.

"I figured you might be an ally. I've got business in this room, too," I gestured with my eyes to the crowd and the door. The aggressive young merc looked dubiously at Mei, who was waiting behind me. I could forgive that; after all, I had not just two swords, but also a Maidroid trotting at my heels.

If I were to put myself in his shoes, I would probably be thinking… *Is this guy really a merc? If he is, what's the deal with the swords? And what the hell is he doing with an expensive-looking Maidroid?* I'd think the same if I were him, so I couldn't really blame him for being on edge.

"Y'know, stuff happens," I shrugged. "I get that you're suspicious, but I'd advise you not to stick your nose where it doesn't belong."

"…Hmph. Just a noble killing time, huh?"

I'm not a noble, though… But if I say too much it'll cause trouble, so I'd better wait for the crowd to thin out. This mob seemed to be some sort of screening for award recipients. After a few minutes, the crowd started to thin out, and it was our turn to go through the screening.

"May I see your ID?" a soldier asked.

"Sure."

I placed my handheld terminal on top of the soldier's tablet and sent my ID. The moment my information was displayed, the soldier looked up at me in shock, then glanced back down at the tablet, and then looked up at me again. Was it shocking enough to warrant a double take? *Don't look at my feet! I'm not a ghost. Wait, do ghosts have feet in this universe or not?*

"Um…?"

"Oh?! M-my apologies, sir! Right this way!" After checking my ID, the soldier struck a crisp salute and led me inside.

When I entered the venue, countless eyes were on me. These gazes were all from the military personnel running the ceremony; the recipients were all seated facing away from me. The venue was fairly small; I stood out a lot with the nervous soldier ushering me in and Mei trailing behind me. And when Lieutenant Commander Serena saw me with the swords at my hip and Mei at my side, she made one hell of a face.

Come to think of it, Serena had never met Mei in person, had she? Maybe they had interacted without my knowledge, but I had no recollection of it.

"You want me to sit here?" I asked.

"Yes, sir! That's correct."

"Err…?"

For some reason, I was led to an isolated spot to the front left of the other attendees. I guess it was more like a visitor's seat. And it was angled in an odd direction—facing the other attendees. *Is this some form of bullying?* Across from me, I could see some military VIPs who were clearly here to conduct the ceremony. Serena was over there too.

"Let us begin the award ceremony." The biggest-shot soldier of them all of them spoke up, and a large holo-display turned on to show a three-

dimensional map. It looked like a bird's-eye view of a battlefield.

Kinda looks like a screenshot from a strategy game, I mused. The battle was reenacted onscreen, with highlighted shapes on the map symbolizing the people who would be recognized today. The presentation made it easy to see who had contributed. Maybe this award ceremony was part debriefing?

From the start to about halfway, the battle was not looking good for the Imperial Fleet. The fleet was fighting bravely on all fronts, but the crystal life-forms were gradually pushing them back. I focused my attention on the *Lestarius*—Lieutenant Commander Serena's ship—and the Pirate-Hunting Unit under its command. They were performing quite the tightrope-walking act protecting their allies. They must've been in real danger.

Eventually, a piece symbolizing the *Black Lotus* appeared. Another piece shot out of it at high speed—the *Krishna*. Seeing it like this really brought home how fast my little ship was. *Oh, it's glowing to draw people's attention to it.* It plunged into the crystal life-forms, and murmurs swelled in the venue.

Part of the large holo-display zoomed in on a smaller map showing the immediate area around the *Krishna*. My ship weaved between small and medium crystals and lobbed reactive anti-ship torpedoes at the big bosses.

At the same time, the original large 3D map began to show a change in the enemy's movements. The large crystals damaged by the *Krishna*'s torpedoes spawned far fewer minions, and all the crystal life-forms began to focus on the *Krishna*.

The reduction in enemy numbers gave the Imperial Fleet, who had been waging a defensive battle up to this point, enough breathing room to begin launching attacks at the crystal life-forms. While they culled the enemy's numbers, the *Krishna* continued to draw the enemy's attention.

Finally, the large crystal life-forms were destroyed by the Imperial Fleet, bringing the battle to an end.

The room exploded with voices.

"Huh? Is that guy still alive?"

“I wondered why the enemy fell apart all of a sudden…”

“Even I couldn’t do that…”

“Nah. Nuh-uh, no way.”

“You couldn’t give me enough lives to try that. That guy’s insane.”

“No doubt about it; he’s psycho.”

You guys sure have a lot of complaints! I knew a whole bunch of players in Stella Online *who could do the same!*

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Once the holo-video finished displaying the battle, the award ceremony began. Another reel began to play on the holo-display, showing a chronological list of the accomplishments that had earned the military officers and mercenaries their awards.

They were decorated for a host of different reasons, but almost all the officers being awarded seemed to be captains of their ships.

Even the Imperial Fleet used small craft like the *Krishna*. Destroyers and bigger ships had no way of handling swarms of small crystals, so they scrambled small craft to defend the larger ones. These small craft seemed especially common in this outpost, as over half the officers receiving awards were captains of such ships.

Captains of large battleships such as destroyers were recognized, as well. Serena was among them. She was receiving something called the Bronze-Winged Shield Badge, which was apparently awarded to ships that had protected allies and kept casualties to a minimum in battle.

The decorations were divided into three tiers: bronze, silver, and gold. There were also two types, sword and shield, and then they seemed to add random words like “assault” in there. For example, if you’d been a great help in defeating enemy ships, you might earn the Bronze Sword Badge, Silver Sword Badge, or Gold Sword Badge. If you fought in a defensive battle or protected allies through your actions, you’d get the same, but with a shield thrown in instead of a sword.

But the awards given here had the word “winged” in them as well. Maybe accolades from battles in outer space included that by default? Maybe you wouldn’t get the “winged” part if you were fighting on terra firma.

There were probably lots of other types of awards and decorations out there; the ones given here today were only for people fighting in battle. Resupplying, maintenance, and other important jobs probably got some kind of recognition too, but if so, if wasn’t being bestowed at this award ceremony. Heck, I doubted that these were even all the battle-related awards.

Also, no decorations with random extra words like the Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge I’d receive had been given out yet. Most were just Bronze-Winged Sword Badges and Bronze-Winged Shield Badges. Only one Imperial Fleet small craft captain and one merc had received Silver-Winged Sword Badges so far.

“Now, our final commendation is for one who turned the tides of battle single-handedly. The Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge is awarded to Captain Hiro. Captain Hiro, please come to the front.”

I stood up and walked to the front, stopping in front of the officer who seemed to be the commander of this outpost. I’d seen the process—or etiquette, whatever—of accepting these awards several times by now, so I wasn’t worried. It seemed like a piece of cake; just walk up, let them pin the badge to your chest, and salute.

The salute here was the same as the basic military salute used in my old world. There were some minor differences in the angle of your hand, how you raised it, and where your palm was supposed to face, but they weren’t too strict about mercenaries, so I didn’t think too hard about it.

“Captain Hiro. If not for your bravery, many of the people standing here would be lost. Hundreds of our subordinates would have suffered the same fate. It is exceedingly rare to receive the Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge during one’s lifetime. We anticipate more great accomplishments from you befitting of this symbol.”

Upon receiving the badge, I saluted without a word and turned around. At times like this, it was best not to say anything unnecessary.

Like the man said, I was the final award on the agenda. Once I sat back down, the big shots began wrapping things up.

I tuned out most of their closing speech. I probably should've listened more carefully, given that this was a briefing from the higher-ups of this outpost, but it didn't seem all that relevant to me. I hadn't fought for the glory of the empire, anyway; I just did it because I figured it would be good money. Blah blah, "the fate of the empire," "protecting the lives and property of its citizens," et cetera. I pretended to listen, but only about a fifth of it actually entered my brain.

While the official droned on, I sized up the officers and mercenaries in the room. The officers were listening attentively to the officials' speech, but most of the mercenaries were ignoring it like me. If you're wondering what *they* were doing…well, they were sizing me up. They had to be, because they kept making eye contact with me.

I didn't recognize any of them, of course. I hadn't spent long on any colony, so I wouldn't know any mercenaries by sight. Maybe it would be a good idea to pick a colony as a home base? A place with lots of assets, ammunition, and food to supply us, along with a Space Dwergr office *and* a few boatloads of pirates to hunt—now that would be nice.

Honestly, the Vlad System wasn't bad, as far as it went. It was great for shopping, replenishing ammo, and ship maintenance. But the colonies were made for dwarves, so they were really cramped. I also didn't like the thought of those overzealous engineers stalking us to get a better look at the *Krishna*. Mimi's dream was to taste all the food in the galaxy; maybe it was too early to settle down on a home base.

I was deep in thought when the officials finished their speech, and the crowd began to disperse. The VIPs left first, followed by officers ranked lieutenant or higher. The look on Lieutenant Commander Serena's face as she gazed at me was rather striking.

"Am I good to go, too?" I asked.

"Yes, I believe it is safe now," Mei replied.

I stood and moved toward the entrance. What was the point of putting me in that strange, conspicuous seat? Was that special treatment for being

the biggest contributor to the battle? It felt more like I was being put on display. It was…unpleasant. Embarrassing.

"Let's get back to the ship. We might have word on the request by now," I said, trying to squeeze past the crowd. But my way was blocked. More precisely, someone had intentionally stood in my way. It was an unfamiliar face—*Wait, no it's not. That's the young merc who sized me up before we came in.* I didn't expect any good to come from this, but I asked anyway, "Is there something I can help you with?"

Most of the people left in the room were mercenaries, though there were also a few military officers left. They watched me and the merc blocking my way with great interest.

"What kind of cheap trick did you use?"

"Pardon?"

"I'm asking you what *trick* you used."

"Uh…you mean how did I survive going into that swarm?"

"What else could I mean?"

This guy was a pain in the ass. I felt people staring, but they were shrugging, crossing their arms, and grinning—they weren't going to interrupt this show. But of course. I'd do the same thing or outright leave if I were in their shoes.

"What kind of answer are you expecting here?" I asked.

"What?"

"If there was a trick, do you really think I would tell *you*? Hell, I wouldn't be willing even if you got on the floor and begged, let alone demanding it like an asshole the way you're doing now. If you want to learn, then act like it."

"You little…" He clenched his hands into fists.

Ooh? Whatcha got? Wanna fight? Just so you know, I'm probably pretty weak. I've been working out in this universe, but I've never gotten into a real fistfight. Elma taught me some basic martial arts, but I haven't actually used them!

“If that’s all you want, then I’m out,” I said dismissively. “Sorry, but I’ve got places to be.” I shrugged and slipped by him.

“Gaaaaah!” There was a scream from behind me. Curious, I turned around to see Mei clutching the man’s wrist. Based on his position, he’d tried to grab my shoulder as I passed. That was when Mei had stepped in.

“Please refrain from touching my master with your filthy hands.” She cast a glare so cold that it might just hit absolute zero. She continued squeezing his wrist, and I heard his bones creak.

“O-okay, fine! I get it, just let me go!”

Mei released him. *Oh…is he okay? Did she break his wrist?* Mei was made with special metal alloy fiber muscles, so her grip was as strong as power armor. Maybe even stronger. If she’d been serious, she could’ve splattered the walls with his blood.

“If you’ve got time to pick fights, then spend that time in simulators training instead. Also, save your money and upgrade your ship. That’s how I got better. The reason I could charge in and come out safe was because I trained a lot and gained experience. There’s no ‘trick’ to it. I mean it.” I was being totally sincere, but he just held his wrist and glared at me. *Hmm, maybe he’s hopeless.* “Uh… Anyway, there you have it. Good work out there. That goes for everyone else, too.”

I waved to all the people still in the room and made my exit.

After a few minutes of walking, I couldn’t hold it in anymore. “Hoo boy, that was a close one! Mercs are scary guys. I could never handle an actual fistfight.”

“Really…?” Mei cocked her head in confusion—a rare sight. She was as expressionless as ever, but she very rarely showed emotion via body language. “When I saw you in action on Vlad Prime, I thought you must be quite the fighter, Master.”

“In actual combat, sure. But a fistfight is different, right?”

“Is it?” Mei seemed befuddled.

But they’re totally different—aren’t they? At least, they’re different to me. It’s like…you have to approach it differently, or you have to be in a different headspace… Ah, forget it. It doesn’t matter.

“But really, what was with that guy? What a bizarre way to pick a fight.”

“I have to assume he was unhappy with a newer mercenary receiving the Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge, and he wished to intimidate you.”

“Intimidate me?”

“This is apparently common behavior among mercenaries who believe might makes right.”

“Huh… Should I have accepted his challenge, then?”

“Having a companion like me by your side is, in itself, a display of strength. I think you’re fine. Besides…”

“Besides?” I urged her on.

“You could have beaten him down easily if you wanted to, no?”

“I wonder… Well, if I hold my breath, I guess I can handle anything. But I try to avoid using that because I have no idea how it works.”

Ever since I arrived in this world, I’d been able to do some weird super-speed moves just by holding my breath. Convenient as it was, I didn’t want to rely on this method as long as I didn’t know why it was happening. Back when Dr. Shouko examined me, I’d been too afraid to even mention it. All she’d said was that I had unknown genetics. If she knew about my weird ability, she might’ve locked me up.

“Well, whatever,” I shrugged. “We won’t be here long regardless. Forget about it.”

“Depending on the fleet’s request, we may end up staying at this outpost for some time.”

“Riiight. Ugh, what a pain… What if we pretended we never heard about any request?”

“Would that not earn us Serena’s wrath?”

“That sounds like a pain, too… Man, I’m between a rock and a hard place now.” I looked upward with a hint of despair.

Chapter 4:
An Annoying Woman

THE SILVER-WINGED Sword Assault Badge looked more or less as expected—a silver sword with wings spreading out from the hilt. The only unexpected feature was the red, ruby-like jewel set in the center of the hilt.

This thing stood out like a beacon. Whenever members of the military saw it gleaming on my chest, they were hilariously shook.

I walked for a few minutes, basking in a slight sense of superiority, until I suddenly laid eyes on an unwelcome figure. Shining blonde hair, scarlet-red eyes, beautiful features, and a sword hanging at her hip…

"Congratulations on receiving the Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge, Captain Hiro."

"Thanks. Congrats on your Bronze-Winged Shield Badge, too."

"Yes, thank you."

"All right, good talk." When I tried to end the conversation and walk around her, she clapped a hand on my shoulder and held on tight.

Mei! Mei, help! I called out in my heart, but the Maidroid beside me remained expressionless and made no move to stop Serena.

"Master, you cannot escape. It would be best to go quietly."

"I love reasonable girls like you," Serena grinned. "Compared to this stubborn man here…"

"Yeah yeah, I don't know how to give up." But it *would* be hard to shake her off, so for now, I decided to be good. "So? What do you want? Guessing you're craving my company?"

"You catch on fast. Though I'd prefer it if you didn't give me a hard time in the first place."

"That's all in the past; let's focus on the now. Where are we headed? Would my ship be an acceptable destination?"

"Your ship will do. In fact, I've already sent my subordinates."

“Figures…”

Lieutenant Commander Serena strode ahead. I hustled to catch up and walked next to her, while Mei quietly followed behind.

“I’ve got a lot of questions for you…but first, why in the world are you wearing those swords?” she demanded.

“Count Dalenwald gave them to me when Mei and I beat up this guy who attacked him.”

“He gave…what…?” She was stunned by my point-blank answer.

“What was it, again…? He said something like, ‘I hate that you interrupted our duel, but you defeated him, so you take them.’”

“I…see.” Serena thought for a moment and turned her eyes to Mei. “And this girl’s name is Mei?”

“Yeah. She looks like a maid, but she can go toe-to-toe against any power armor.”

“Hmm. And how long have you two been together?”

“Ever since I bought her on Sierra III, I guess.”

“Correct,” Mei chimed in.

“Sierra III? How have I not met her?”

“Well, she’s been cooped up on the *Krishna*.”

“Correct,” Mei said. “We did not have the opportunity to meet.”

“I see…”

We hadn’t invited Serena onto the *Krishna* for a drinking party that time. Partially because I saw absolutely no reason to.

“Mei is a machine intelligence with a miniature positronic brain. Don’t treat her like an object, okay?”

“I know. What exactly do you think of me?” The lieutenant commander narrowed her eyes indignantly.

I think you’re as an ill-mannered and clingy lieutenant commander, of course. Why? If I actually said that she’d probably clock me, so I kept quiet.

“So really, what do you need to chat about?” I asked her. “If it’s about the request, you could’ve gone through the mercenary guild.”

“There’s no need to be so cold with me. You may find that my friendship comes with its own perks.”

“I can’t think of a single one so far. Honestly, when I think back to memories of you all I see are problems.”

“Well that makes two of us.” Serena pouted, sticking her bottom lip out like a kid. She was lucky she was beautiful; no matter what she did, she always looked good. Ha ha ha.

“Are you perchance referring to what happened in the Sierra System, my dear Lieutenant Commander? All I did was pay you back for what you did to me.”

Her puppy eyes couldn’t defeat me that easily. I spent every day with the beautiful Mimi and Elma, and the ideal Maidroid Mei. Serena may have been a stunner, but that alone wouldn’t do me in. Not to mention, Lieutenant Commander Serena was such an irritating woman that I had zero feelings for her. She dealt no damage to me whatsoever.

Oh? What about the twins, you ask? They were cute, but it still felt like a crime to go near them… I mean, even though it wasn’t. They were adults, but…y’know. It didn’t *look* right.

“Okay, okay, I understand. You don’t have to make your disdain for me quite so clear, you know…” Her voice faltered, revealing her true feelings. That’s what I really hated about her—she wasn’t *too* perfect, betraying vulnerability at the worst of times.

“I don’t ‘disdain’ you, though. You’re just annoying.”

“Isn’t that the same as saying you hate me?” Serena frowned and knitted her brow. *That’s a waste of your gorgeous face, Lieutenant Commander.*

“Look, it’s just that your position is annoying in a few ways. Your personality isn’t much of a problem by itself. You’re a quick thinker, you’re pretty, and I gotta say, I find it cute how you’re a little messy in private.”

“Messy…is cute?”

“It’s that you’re not overwhelmingly perfect,” I explained. “A flawless superhuman would be totally unapproachable.”

“I’m not sure if I should take that as a compliment… But still, it’s obvious that you avoid me.”

“Because you’re annoying in a few ways, yes.”

“Can you stop using that word? It rather hurtful.”

Lieutenant Commander, you’re really annoying.

“First, your family background is annoying. It’s hard to be frank with you because I worry that, if I do or say something wrong, the marquess might come for my life.”

“There’s nothing I can do about my parentage,” she complained.

“Guess the fault lies in your stars.”

“How blunt… Haah.” Serena slumped her shoulders and sighed deeply. *See, this is exactly what I mean.*

“You’re cute, so as a man, I want to give you attention. Yet because of your position as a big shot and the marquess’ daughter, there’s no way I can do that. As a result, men will naturally avoid you, because catching feelings could mean major trouble.”

“Is this supposed to make me feel better?”

“I’m saying nobody really hates you. They just don’t want to get close because of all that annoying stuff.”

“I see,” she grumbled. “You’re not trying to make me feel better; you’re picking a fight. Well, I’ll gladly rise to the occasion.”

Serena glared daggers at me and laid a hand on her sword’s hilt. I threw up both hands in surrender.

“Please no, I’m gonna die!”

Before I knew it, we’d arrived at the hangar where the *Black Lotus* was docked. Three of Serena’s subordinates were waiting for us. One was a bulky military man; this was Lieutenant Robertson, Serena’s aide. The other two were women whose names I didn’t know. Since the lieutenant commander was openly visiting my ship, she needed a number of personnel present.

“Lieutenant Commander,” Lieutenant Robertson greeted her.

“Thank you all for coming.”

“It is our pleasure.”

“It’s been a while,” I greeted the lieutenant. “Let me show you around the new digs.”

“Indeed, it has,” he replied. “Congratulations on receiving the Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge.”

“Thanks. Though I feel like I don’t really understand the gravity of it.”

“Ha ha ha! That sounds like you.”

I was briefly acquainted with Lieutenant Robertson. We’d seen each other a few times when I taught anti-pirate tactics to Serena’s Pirate-Hunting Unit in the Arein System. I didn’t know the women’s names, but I’d definitely seen their faces before.

Serena looked a little confused to see we were so buddy-buddy now, but I ignored her and guided the whole party into the *Black Lotus*. I ignored how amazed they were by the luxury of the ship’s interior and headed straight for the living quarters and dining hall, where Mimi and Elma were waiting. I didn’t see the twins around; were they holed up in their rooms?

“I’m back,” I called out. “Where are Tina and Wiska?”

“They went back to their quarters so they wouldn’t get in the way of your chat with the military,” Elma answered.

“We’ll probably want to discuss our plans for the immediate future, so I’d prefer if they were present.”

“I said the same,” Elma shrugged. Those two were meek at the strangest times.

“Mimi, would you mind calling them up?”

“Understood!”

“Members of the fleet, please take a seat,” I addressed them. “As captain of this vessel, I don’t care about the positioning of the seats or anything like that, so sit wherever you like. Mei, can I get you to bring everyone water?”

“It will be done.”

While Mimi tapped her tablet, I urged everyone to sit, and had Mei prepare drinks. I wouldn’t mind serving them coffee or tea with the Steel Chef 5, but asking each of their preferences would be too much of a pain. For now, they’d be getting normal purified water.

“Umm…” I began, unsure how to proceed. “I assume you’ve come to visit regarding the request, right?”

“That’s right,” Serena answered. “It would be difficult to explain all the nuances via the mercenary guild, so a direct conversation is ideal. Consider these preliminary negotiations rather than a formal request through the guild.”

“Understood. Elma and Mimi, does that work for you?”

“Yup.”

“Sure.”

“There you have it… Oh, but I’m gonna ask you to wait just a moment. We have two sort-of crew members on loan from Space Dwergr, and I want them to hear this.”

“Is that so… More girls, I presume?” Serena cast a cold glare my way.

I shrugged. “I don’t know why you’re glaring at me, but yes, they are women.” Just as I replied, the dwarven twins came sprinting into the dining hall.

“We’re deeply sorry for making you wait for us!”

“We’re so sorry! Please forgive us!”

Tina and Wiska bowed so low that they looked practically ready to fling themselves on the ground. After staring at them for a few seconds, Lieutenant Commander Serena turned back to me.

“Don’t tell me…” she groaned.

“I’m not gonna ask what you’re imagining, but no. I haven’t touched them. Also, they’re dwarves. They may be small, but they’re grown women. Please understand that. *Please*.”

Why was I defending myself so feverishly when we were supposed to be talking about work? *Damn, this lieutenant commander is annoying.*

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Mei supplied bottled water for everyone, and our so-called preliminary negotiations began. I'm using some ten-Ener words here, but basically, it was time to hash out our conditions before we actually did anything.

"First things first: Command has approved my proposal to hire your vessels as bodyguards for mine," Serena informed us.

"Great," I replied. "That's way better than being stuck guarding a bunch of unknowns."

"Agreed. It will also be much easier for us to strategize since we are familiar with your skills and firepower."

"So what insane thing are you asking us to do?" Elma asked.

Serena raised an eyebrow. "It's hardly *insane*. We've simply been entrusted with the investigation of a rather dangerous sector."

"*Rather* dangerous?" Mimi asked. She looked tense. I found Serena's choice of words pretty sketchy, too.

"Indeed. The Izulux System is a hyperlane hub system. Hyperlanes from five other systems converge here, and four of those five are in imperial territory. The last is connected to the frontier sectors."

"Frontier sectors… Have you sent any research vessels?" I asked.

"We sent one group some time ago, but they've yet to return. Even the empire does not have limitless resources, so we've positioned our frontline outpost here and allocated resources evenly on other fronts in order to continue developing our territory."

"I see. What about private research vessels?"

"Many have yet to return. However, that doesn't mean *none* have. Thanks to reports from surviving private research vessels, we have

confirmed the presence of crystal life-forms and bolstered our forces at this outpost to prepare for the worst."

"I can tell. That's how you ended up here, right?"

"Not quite," said Serena. "We were the additional reinforcements requested after the crystal life-forms became even *more* active. Our presence here is temporary."

"Uh-huh… So if we choose to accept this request, we'll be tagging along with your unit to investigate the unresearched sector."

"Yes. And I believe we can expect to encounter—and battle—crystal life-forms."

"Right. And how about the reward?"

"You will receive four hundred thousand Ener per twenty-four hours," she answered.

"Really splurging on this, huh?"

"Four hundred thousand…" Tina muttered, astonished. Wiska froze, wide-eyed. Mimi and Elma looked deep in thought; I probably looked the same.

"Just so we're clear, I'm not going down with your ship if things go south," I warned her. The huge reward sounded nice, but it scared me. It was so extravagant that I felt like she'd force me to do some really crazy stuff to get her money's worth.

"We wouldn't willingly do that ourselves, to be frank. The reward is reasonable given your abilities, and it comes with the expectation that you will continue to provide us with exemplary work."

"Exemplary work, huh?" I *was* terrified she'd wring me dry…but there wasn't really any point in complaining now. "And you said you wouldn't willingly go down with *your* ship either, right?"

"Yes? I did say that…"

"Then promise me now that we'll run away if things get too hot to handle, *and* that you'll listen to my warnings. This can be a private, personal agreement between us; we don't have to put down in black and

white on the contract that it's okay to flee from an unwinnable battle. Promise me that, and I'll accept."

"Hrmmm…" Serena laid a hand against her delicate jawline, pondered for a moment, and finally agreed. "Very well. You have my word. I promise to heed your warnings, and to prioritize your and your crew's safety. Will that do?"

"Works for me. Girls, any thoughts?"

"No; I agree with everything you've said, Master Hiro," said Mimi.

"No complaints from me, either," agreed Elma.

"Tina and Wiska?"

"U-us? We don't have much to say…"

"Sis, the report!" Wiska piped up.

"Ah, yeah! Say, er, Miss Lieutenant Commander?" Tina turned to Serena.

"Yes?" She cocked her head.

"We… Er, sorry. Wiska and I have been keeping a data log to report to our company. Uh, is it okay if we include this stuff in our log?"

"I see… It shouldn't be an issue if it only includes things you witness from your own ship, but just in case, perhaps I should review it."

"Government censorship? Wow," I joked.

Serena glared. "How rude… It could create a huge problem if sensitive information found its way into these reports. I simply want to avoid that. This is in the interests of goodwill and nothing more."

"I have been performing daily reviews, so there should be no issues," Mei announced. "After careful review, I will dispatch the contents to you."

"Oh? I'd appreciate that."

"Understood." Mei bowed. It sounded like Mei would be the real censor here.

For some reason, Tina looked awfully confused by Mei's response. Wiska hadn't really reacted; did she know about Mei's oversight? Why didn't Tina, then?

“Also, there’s the question of chain of command,” I said, bringing the discussion back on track. “Are we doing the same as last time?”

“Yes. You will be my direct subordinates. Only I, as commander of the unit, will have the authority to give you orders.”

“Okay. Send everything we just discussed to the guild, please.”

“Understood.”

“One more thing: supplies. The *Black Lotus* just sold off all its cargo, so we have a lot of free space.”

“Lovely,” Serena smiled. “It would be a big help if you could transport some of our supplies.”

“Indeed. But not out of the goodness of our hearts.”

“A little greedy today, aren’t we?” Her lips twitched despite her smile.

Look, you should know that safe, secure space doesn’t come free, especially in out here in the black.

“Now, now. Hear me out. I’m not after your money.”

Lieutenant Commander Serena looked at me dubiously. “…Go on.”

I spread my hands wide and explained, “I don’t want to leave this star system with empty an empty hold when this is all over. In other words, I want to take stuff with us. In exchange for contributing to the operation by carrying supplies in our cargo bay, I want you to give us a connection to buy the materials harvested from the crystals when we’re done.”

“Hmm…”

“We’ll help with your work as much as we possibly can, so I’d like you to do the same for us, within your abilities. I figure it’s a fair deal. How about you?”

“I would be remiss not to ask: I hope you don’t mean—”

I interrupted her. “Of course I’m not saying I want you to hand over materials for free like a black-market dealer. I just want a line on buying quality materials approved by the military for a reasonably low price.”

I remembered the first time I'd met Serena. She was a strong person who stood firmly against injustice. I wasn't stupid enough to ask her to steal from the military for us.

"Very well," she agreed. "I have some connections in Accounting, so I can make some arrangements. Also, I forgot to say, but our vessels have the cargo space to carry the necessities for the job. Luxury items, however, are a different matter."

"Roger that. We'll send you data on our cargo capacity later."

"Understood. Well, I believe that settles everything." Lieutenant Commander Serena stood up, and we saw her and her subordinates off.

"There you have it, everyone," I announced to the crew. "Ready yourselves for the mission ahead."

"Roger!"

"Got it."

"Yes, Master."

"S-sure…"

"U-understood!"

The twins were still scared of stuff like this. Not that I could blame them. Most normal people didn't travel to frontier sectors teeming with crystal life-forms. Common people all over the galaxy were terrified of being assimilated into the crystals.

"Don't worry, girls. The *Black Lotus* isn't going to be facing enemies directly. If a gunship like ours is in the direct line of fire, we're all already dead. Serena will retreat long before that happens, so you and the *Black Lotus* will stay pretty far from the action."

"O-oh… So we're gonna be okay?"

"I wouldn't worry one bit."

Not about Tina, Wiska, and Mei, at least. The *Krishna* with me, Mimi, and Elma inside would certainly end up in close-quarters combat against the crystals. But we'd be fine as long as we weren't facing a seriously huge swarm. We had the Pirate-Hunting Unit on our side, too, after all.

“We’ve finished resupplying, right?” I asked my girls.

“Yep!” Mimi answered. “As you directed, we’ve loaded four reactive anti-ship torpedoes onto the *Krishna* and twelve onto the *Black Lotus* as backup.”

“The person handling the resupply cringed pretty hard, though,” Elma said with a wry grin.

“Hey, if we’re getting supplies for free, you bet I’m gonna make the most of it.”

I’d planned to get twenty torpedoes as backup, but they’d told us that we could get twelve at most. I didn’t mind. Depending on how you used them, you could destroy an entire colony with a single torpedo. I could see why they were cautious about giving them out.

“We’ve still got food, water, and everyday essentials from Vlad Prime. The military will take care of our needs while we’re with them, too… Yep, I’m thinking we’re ready to launch as soon as we accept the request and take on their cargo. How’s the ship maintenance?” I turned to the twins, who still looked nervous. Hopefully focusing on some practical details would help them relax.

“Mm, the *Krishna*’s done,” Tina answered. “We still have some minor checks left on the *Black Lotus*, but they oughta be done within the day.”

Wiska added, “The *Black Lotus* fired at full capacity during the battle, so we’ve been taking an extra look at wear on the energy weapons and rigging. At the moment, no major issues stand out.”

“That so? Keep up the good work.”

“Leave it to us.”

“Okay!”

“All right, everyone, let’s disperse for now. Once the guild contacts us and we’ve got a departure time, I’ll contact you. Until then, finish what you need to finish, then you’re free to do whatever. Oh, but try to stay on the ship if you can. There’s nowhere to hang out or sightsee out there, anyway.”

Everyone readily agreed.

What about me? I had nothing to do but wait for them to contact us. *Maybe I should check in on everyone?* This request would be a lot more dangerous than our usual pirate hunts. It was a captain's duty to watch out for his crew's mental health, don't you think?

Chapter 5:
A Captain's Duty

"HMMMM…"

Where would I begin? Mimi, Elma, Mei, the twins… *Maybe I should check on the twins first. Mimi and Elma are used to me doing crazy things, and Mei shouldn't be a problem no matter what. I should start with the people who have been here the least amount of time. Besides, I have time for nice, long chats with Mimi and Elma at night.*

I decided to go visit the twins.

"Oh hey, hon. What's up?" Tina greeted me.

They were currently sitting together on the sofa in the lounge. They weren't even doing anything—they just sat leaning on each other, staring at the terrarium full of extraterrestrial plants.

"Uh…hey," I stammered. "I was just seeing how everyone's doing. Am I interrupting?" If they were relying on their sisterly bond to calm down together, then there wasn't much I could do here. "I'll just fade right out. Don't mind me."

"Nah, don't go. Come sit with us." Tina parted from Wiska, scooted away from her sister just enough for me to fit, and patted the space between them.

"You want me to sit right there…? Are you sure?"

Inserting myself into a yuri-type situation felt like an easy way to get killed, in more ways than one. I mean…not that that term would apply to those two.

"Whaddaya mean? C'mon and sit!"

"O-okay…"

"You're so weird!" Tina cackled as I plopped down next to her. Naturally, that meant sitting snuggly next to Wiska, too.

"Huggies!"

“Whoa?!”

As soon as I sat down, Tina nestled in to hug me.

“C’mon! You do it too, Wis!”

“Okay… H-huggies.”

Tina had managed to goad Wiska into following her lead. What was going on here?

“I’m just kind of in a touchy mood, y’know?” Tina said. “Oh, but not in a *sexual* way.”

“I’d be concerned if it was in a sexual way.”

“Why? You don’t find li’l ol’ Tina cute? And Wis is plenty adorable, too!” I could see Tina was starting to get mad, even as she clung tightly to my arm.

“Look, I can accept that both of you are cute, but…”

Whether they gave off a “cute” vibe or not was one thing, but as for the rest… Like, sure, they were cute; but their diminutiveness made it feel way too dangerous. What if it awakened something inside me? That was a really terrifying thought.

“Anyway, forget that. Please. Umm…” I stammered again.

“Umm…?”

“I can’t think of any tasteful subjects of conversation.”

“Not much of a talker, huh? Gotta wonder what Mimi and Elma see in this guy…”

“Can it! If you think I’m a poor conversationalist, then how about you start?”

“Good idea. Okay, how about I tell you an embarrassing story about Wis?”

“Sis!”

Heedless of her sister’s protests, Tina launched into her tale. “It all happened about four months ago. We had a ship that needed a fresh coat of paint. So there we were painting, and Wis got paint all over the butt of her

uniform. She never even noticed, and she left paint butt-prints all over the workshop…"

"Siiiis!" Wiska screamed, red-faced, cutting Tina off. She must've been clumsier than she looked, huh?

“Adorable, right?” Tina giggled.

“Pretty adorable.”

“Nngh… If that’s how it’s gonna be, then how about I tell him embarrassing stories about *you*?!” Wiska cried.

“Heh, give it a try! I’ve got stories up my sleeve that are twice as embarrassing as any dirt you’ve got on me.”

I wondered if any embarrassing story could be as bad as them rushing into my room with barely any clothes on that one time… Regardless, I listened attentively.

***

“Gnngh…”

“Mmmgh…”

The twins groaned in anger and embarrassment. It felt like I’d heard a whole lot of mortifying tales about these two in a very short amount time. Though if you ask me, I’d say they were more just random mistakes than truly humiliating stories.

“I liked the one where Tina was so sleepy that she went to work in her pajamas,” I mused.

“E-everyone gets a little over-tired sometimes, okay? It’s not that weird…” Tina grumbled.

“No, it’s pretty weird.” Nobody does that, no matter how sleepy they are.

“Heh heh. See? You’re even clumsier than I am, Sis!”

“Nuh-uh. You’re way clumsier than me, Wis.”

“No! You’re the clumsy one, Sis!”

“Nope. You.”

“No! You!”

“Grrrr…”

Did they not know they were basically the same? It's like that one Japanese saying: There's no point comparing heights between acorns. But as a responsible adult, I kept my mouth shut—even if I believed they were more or less equally embarrassing.

Come to think of it, at some point along the way, Wiska had started clinging to my arm like Tina. Had she gotten so heated that she'd lost sight of her surroundings? Honestly, that added another clumsy point to Wiska. Not that it mattered—but she might've just taken the lead by an inch.

"Y'know, it's kinda unfair for you to hear all of our mishaps, ain't it?" Tina asked, turning the conversation back to me.

"Hmm…she's right. Tell us some of *your* embarrassing stories!"

"My stories, huh…?"

They were really putting me on the spot here. I hadn't told them about my circumstances—the real circumstances—so I couldn't be too candid. I decided to tell them the made-up memory loss story I'd used on Mimi and Elma at first.

"I don't remember much about my past. My only clear memories start right before meeting Mimi and Elma… As far as we can tell, it was caused by some sort of hyperdrive accident."

"Pssh. Yeah, right… Huh? Wait, for real?"

"Yeah, for real. It all started when I woke up floating in space in the cold, powered-off *Krishna*. Somehow I was lucky enough to remember how to operate the ship. I survived thanks to that. Pirates attacked me, but I managed to make it to Tarmein Prime. They were immediately suspicious of me because there was no docking record of my ship at all."

"That's… Wait, so you don't remember your family or siblings?"

"Nope. But I'm not worri—" I tried to say I wasn't worried about it, but the twins looked up at me, wide-eyed, from both sides. *What?* I cocked my head.

"Hon, you've been soldiering on all this time with such a brave face…"

"Aren't you lonely? Are you okay…?"

The two stretched their little arms up as far as they could and stroked my hair. *Hmm…I can't say I grew up in a loving family environment, so it kind of feels bad that they're worrying over me so much.*

"Hey, I'm not that cut up about it," I tried to assure them.

"Don't you lie to us. It must feel awful to have no memories of your family."

"She's right, hon."

"I-I guess so…" I was overcome by this rush of sentimental words. They just looked so sincere. I could tell that they were honestly worried about me, so it felt wrong to push them away.

"If you're ever lonely, you can come to us for some love, y'know," Tina said to me.

"No, I—"

"Do you…not want to?" Wiska asked sadly.

"I-it's not that, but…"

Can you two cool it?! And think, man, think… Think of a way to get out of this… Aha!

"Let's forget about my memories for now, okay? Aren't you interested in how I met Mimi, Elma, and Mei? I'm sure you've chatted with all of them by now, but you haven't heard those stories, have you?"

"Hmm…actually, that's true."

"Yeah, right? Since we were just talking about Tarmein Prime, let's start there…"

I told them about the colony where I first met Elma, Mimi, and Lieutenant Commander Serena. As I spoke, the two started to press in even closer. It seemed like they were looking at me differently… Anyway, I decided to call this long chat a success.

***

The twins had been in the middle of a break while the maintenance bots recharged and self-maintained. When the MAINTENANCE COMPLETE alarm went off, they reluctantly got up from the couch and returned to work. I saw them off and began the walk to the *Black Lotus'*s bridge, where I found Mei.

"Master? What brings you here?"

When I stepped onto the bridge, Mei turned around to greet me. A cable stretched from her wrist and to the bridge's console. She probably used that thin connection to control the entirety of the *Black Lotus*. But we weren't in flight right now, so I honestly had no idea what she was doing with it.

"Nothing important. I just thought it would be nice to check up on everyone before we accept that request and launch."

"And so you came to visit me?"

"Yeah. You're part of the crew, aren't you?"

"I see."

I felt as though I could see the slightest gleam of joy in the eyes behind those red frames. Mei was expressionless as usual, but lately, I think I'd learned to read slight fluctuations in her emotions. Or maybe it was more like she was becoming more expressive? Her appearance almost never changed, though, so it would only be by the tiniest, tiniest bit.

"You are a mysterious man, Master," she said.

"You think so?"

"Yes. Machine intelligences such as myself are granted human rights under imperial law, but said rights are unfortunately not commonly accepted by human individuals."

"Hmm?" I was having trouble following. What was she getting at here?

"There are several nations where machine intelligence isn't guaranteed rights at all. Even citizens of nations such as our own don't necessarily believe in our human rights. Of course, that does not apply to everybody…but it is very rare for people to truly accept us as individuals,

as you have. Even rarer for them to worry for our mental state when traveling to dangerous places."

With that, Mei closed in on me a little and casually pulled me into a hug. I was taken wholly by surprise. Mei was tall, about my own height, and I froze up as she leaned over and embraced me. Her subtle scent made my heart skip a beat. I'd always wondered how a machine could smell so lovely.

"Mei?"

"Yes, I am a machine," Mei said in a rush, "but even we have fears. Crystal life-forms devour organic beings and machine intelligence alike, and this body that you have bequeathed me is no exception. They would devour Miss Mimi, Miss Elma, Tina, or Wiska just the same. These are irreplaceable friends to me. If they were taken from me by the enemy, I would go mad from sorrow."

She loosened her embrace slightly and gazed into my eyes at point-blank range. "But most of all, I'm afraid of losing you, Master. You are my very reason for being. Even if Miss Mimi or Miss Elma survived, I would be broken if I lost you."

She looked at me, more sincere than I'd ever seen her. I nodded silently. I understood.

"In truth," Mei continued, "I wish you wouldn't take requests this dangerous. We could leave the crystal life-forms to the Imperial Fleet. The reward is too small for the risk. If we want Ener, pirate-hunting would be safer, more efficient, and still help many people. However, I know you would not abandon Lieutenant Commander Serena."

"You're right." If I turned Serena away, left this star system, and later learned that she'd died in battle, I would surely regret it. I would wish I'd helped her.

"I will not stop you. I will only do what I can to help."

"Sorry for this."

"Don't be. I'm overjoyed that you cared enough to talk to me about it."

I hugged Mei back. Her skeleton was made of a special powerful alloy, and her muscles were alloy fibers. Her soft skin was artificially synthesized organic material, and her body heat was emitted from the micro-generator inside her. Her sleek, black hair and beautiful obsidian eyes were all imitations of humanity.

But to me, Mei was Mei. It didn't matter whether she was human or not.

"I won't let the crystal life-forms get the better of us," I said, resolute.

"Right. I believe in you."

"You'd better. I won't betray your expectations, I swear."

After pressing our bodies tightly together for a long moment, we finally pulled away.

"Leave the management and piloting of the *Black Lotus* to me," Mei said. "This is your home to come back to, Master, and I will protect it to the last."

"I'll be counting on you."

"Of course. Please do." Mei bowed.

I waved to her and headed to the *Krishna* to meet with Mimi and Elma.

***

Mimi and Elma were in the *Krishna*'s cockpit.

"What are you girls up to?" I called out as I entered.

"Oh, Master Hiro!"

"Accepting this request means fighting crystal life-forms. Mimi wanted to adjust the *Krishna*'s radar in preparation, so I tagged along," Elma explained.

"I see."

I doubted it would make a drastic a difference, but it *was* possible to raise the radar's sensitivity to certain targets. By specializing it toward crystal life-forms, we could slightly boost the radar's capabilities. Of course, that meant that, in exchange, it would be less sensitive to other targets.

"Once you adjust it, you can program it as a preset and switch modes at a moment's notice," Elma added. "While we're here, I figured it'd be a good idea to program a few presets."

"That's a good idea. Use it well, and you'll be a cut above other operators."

"I'll do my best!" Reinvigorated, Mimi continued tapping buttons on the console.

I watched from the cockpit entrance. Seeing her here, looking for all the world like she was born to operate ships, reminded me of the day I first brought her aboard. Back then, she'd been so nervous and tense. Now, she was a full-fledged operator.

How long had it been since we'd met? It was hard to maintain a sense of time on ships, so I couldn't say for sure. But it couldn't have even been a full year yet. She must've had real talent hidden away to improve this much in less than a year. Of course, it was also the result of her hard work. She'd spent every free moment using her tablet to study operator work.

While I was lost in thought, I realized they were both staring at me.

"Something wrong?" Elma asked. "You're just standing there vacantly."

"Are you worried about the request?" Mimi asked.

"Nah, that's not it. I'm thinking about how great you've gotten at your job, Mimi."

"Wha…?! Th-that's not true. I'm still just a novice." Mimi blushed and waved her hands vigorously.

She was still a novice in a few ways, sure, but she'd never lost her cool in the middle of battle. When she did her operator work, she looked cool, collected, and confident.

“He’s right,” Elma agreed. “You’re nothing like how you were in the Tarmein System.”

“Ohhh…even you, Elma?” Mimi pouted from embarrassment. She thought we were teasing her.

“I don’t know about Elma, but I’m serious.”

“Excuse me? I’m totally serious! But I guess if you’re gonna fly on Hiro’s ship, you gotta learn fast.”

“Agreed. It’s all thanks to you, Master Hiro.” Mimi suddenly turned the conversation back on me.

“Me?”

“Yup. Getting the level of experience we get here, she’s bound to grow fast.”

Mimi nodded along to Elma’s words. To be fair, we did take down a lot more space pirates than other ships. That meant she’d been through tons of battles in a relatively short time, just as Elma said. Maybe real experience was linked to fast growth, but this wasn’t a video game. That couldn’t be all it took to make her a better operator.

I disagreed. “I think it’s more because of how hard you’ve studied, Mimi.”

“That’s totally part of it. Mimi’s efforts, combined with Hiro’s basic training environment.”

“I wouldn’t discount your guidance, Elma,” Mimi said, now piling praise on Elma as well.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “It’s all of those things combined, for sure.”

“Well…maybe so. So, er, what were we talking about?” Elma flushed a little and tried to change the subject.

“About how cute you are, as I recall,” I smirked.

“She gets kind of flustered when she’s in the spotlight, doesn’t she?”

“Jeez! Stop teasing me!”

We laughed and apologized to the furious elf.

After recovering, Elma looked at me pointedly and asked, “So Hiro, what is it, exactly, that you’re doing?”

“Nothing in particular. I’m just wandering around checking up on everyone.”

“Hmm…” Elma approached me and sniffed a delicate sniff. “You’ve been getting awfully close to someone.”

“Oof, scary.”

“You smell like another girl!”

Mimi giggled at our exchange. *Hey, this isn’t funny! I’m seriously scared.*

“Then how about you get a little closer to me and Mimi, too?”

“That’s a good idea!” Mimi agreed.

“Please be gentle with me.”

“Ooh, I know… We’ll need you to pay us back for all the waiting you’ve put us through.” Elma took my left arm, Mimi took my right, and they began hauling me out of the cockpit.

“First, let’s have him feed us in the dining hall!” Mimi said.

“Good plan. What should we do after…?” Elma wondered.

“How about we make him give us a massage?”

“Yeah, yeah. Your wish is my command.” I grinned wryly as the girls dragged me away. *Hey, might as well enjoy being taken advantage of a bit. Once we accept this request and launch, there won’t be much time for flirting.*

Chapter 6:
Recon Squad

EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, we received a direct request through the mercenary guild. It was just as we'd discussed: We'd be paid 400,000 Ener per day. The *Krishna* and *Black Lotus* would accompany Lieutenant Commander Serena's Pirate-Hunting Unit and support her in battle. The Imperial Fleet would bear any resupply costs we faced. The *Black Lotus* would store what provisions it could, working as both a gunship and a supply ship. The contract had a maximum length of three months, or ninety days.

"Three months max…" Mimi said rather dispiritedly, gazing at her tablet.

Three months was just the outer limit. The job might end much earlier, depending on how things went. But there was no doubt that we'd be tied up for a pretty long time.

"I'd say it's reasonable. That includes hyperlane travel time, after all," I replied from atop the *Krishna*'s ladder as I watched Imperial Fleet supplies being hauled into the *Black Lotus*'s cargo bay.

This labor was being performed by the *Black Lotus*'s A.I.-controlled intake system. Its carrier drones were brought the items through in a seamlessly efficient cargo-loading dance, so it was kind of fun to watch.

"Yup," Elma said. "I don't know how many systems we'll be crossing through, but it could be many days of travel."

Elma watched alongside me, but she didn't seem as interested. She wasn't that into watching machines at work. But as for me, I never got tired of watching industrial machines working in perfect, unbroken order.

"We haven't had a request with a long retainer since the Arein System, have we?" Mimi asked.

"That's right. It's gonna be a long one, so let's take it easy." Mimi wouldn't hold up long if she was always on edge. And if you exhaust

yourself worrying before the main event, then you've already lost the battle. "Still, I doubt it'll be *too* long."

"Do you think so?"

"That so?"

"Well…I can't say for certain." I'd hinted to Serena that pulsar systems were most likely to be the crystals' spawn points. I was just a mercenary, so they had no reason to take my offhand remark seriously. But on the other hand, the Imperial Fleet and Serena had close to zero information on where the crystal life-forms' base could be.

I wouldn't be surprised if they sent the recon team to a pulsar system near the Izulux System if this was their only lead. And there weren't that many pulsar systems around here. I'd only taken a quick look, but there seemed to be no more than two candidates in the general vicinity. I couldn't guarantee that the crystal nest would be in a pulsar system—but since the behavior of the crystal life-forms and properties of Singing Crystals were the same as in *Stella Online*, I had to assume I wasn't too far off.

"Hon!" Tina jogged over with her tablet in hand.

For someone so small, she was a pretty fast runner. We'd worked out together in the training room a few times, so I knew her muscular strength was equal to Elma's. And more than mine, of course.

Her endurance wasn't bad, either. When it came to any workout that involved carrying weight, she could handle three times Elma's limit—five times mine. Where did she fit all that power and toughness in such a tiny frame? Did she store alcohol inside her body and somehow convert it into energy? *Surely not, ha ha ha…*

"Loadin' is almost done. I'd give it fifteen more minutes. It's mostly just food and water and stuff. Some other odds and ends, too."

"All right. Once it's done, stand by. I think we'll be launching shortly."

"Got it."

"Safety first!" I reminded her.

"Yeah, duh! You rest your body and mind before launch too, okay?" Tina waved and went back to work.

Mimi and Elma watched our conversation, then gazed at my face. *What?*

"Tina's acting a bit *different*, isn't she?" Elma asked, narrowing her eyes.

"I think so…" agreed Mimi. "She seems softer. Or rather, she was always genuine and approachable, but now her aura seems more warm."

"Nothing happened between us…except a little chitchat in the lounge, I guess."

"What'd you talk about?"

"Mostly about how I met you two in the Tarmein System. Ah, but I told her the memory-loss story when she asked about my background. That's about it."

"Oh…?"

Mimi and Elma cocked their heads. I figured they were just imagining things. It was true that Tina was being weirdly nice. I suspected she'd taken my lie seriously and was genuinely worried about me. Now that the other girls had noticed, it was starting to get to me, too.

I shrugged. "Anyway, we'll have plenty of time together after takeoff, so we can ask her."

"Sure."

"Good plan."

Everyone agreed, and the girls seemed to put aside the slight change in Tina's attitude for now.

Just as Tina had predicted, the cargo loading was completed exactly fifteen minutes later. Soon after, we were given the order to launch.

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Mimi, Elma, and I stood by in the *Krishna*.

"Just because we launched doesn't mean we have to be all tense," I reminded my crew. "Not yet, at least."

“Right.”

“True, but we can’t slack off too much.”

As long as we didn’t encounter any hostile forces, the *Krishna* would have no reason to launch. I’d left the *Black Lotus*’s operation to Mei, so we didn’t have much to do while en route. Elma was right, though—we couldn’t slack off. We had to be ready to fight at a moment’s notice.

“Keeping up morale is important, you know.”

“Yeah. People are gonna look down on us if we can’t act when the situation calls for it, so don’t get too comfortable.”

“Okay!” Mimi saluted.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I said.

It’d be best to maintain a constant view of what was going on outside in order to keep up my concentration, so I used my console to display the *Black Lotus*’s sensory data on the *Krishna*.

“It’s a hell of sight, all these ships out together,” I mused.

“It really is…”

Serena’s Pirate-Hunting Unit wasn’t the only group on the monitor. I saw quite a number of mercenary ships as well. We weren’t the only mercs accompanying her for this mission—she had a whole crowd of us tagging along.

“Hmm… Just from looking at the ships, you can see there are all kinds of mercs here,” I said.

“Is that so?” Mimi asked.

“But their ships and skills are all way better than any crappy space pirate’s. Rank will only tell part of the story; our skills and equipment will naturally vary. It must be a real headache for the people who have to lead this group.”

Our purpose for being here was to make up for the unit’s poor close-quarters combat capabilities.

“Typically,” I continued, “you have corvettes and mercenaries in front while destroyers protect the main unit. Cruisers and battleships are the ones who really mow down enemy forces.”

“There seem to be only two corvettes in Lieutenant Commander Serena’s unit,” Mimi noted in agreement.

Serena’s Pirate-Hunting Unit was made up of two corvettes, three destroyers, five cruisers, and one battleship. The composition was designed to shoot enemies down before they could fire on the unit.

In battles between nations, where cruisers and battleships were the main actors, that would be perfect. But when fighting crystal life-forms, who loved to get in close and zerg you with pure numbers, it wasn’t great. No matter how strong your cannons are, they’re gonna be useless when the enemy’s too close.

“And that’s why they have so many mercenaries—to cover for that weakness.”

“That does make sense. It’ll be dangerous if we have to fight crystal life-forms, right?”

“I’m sure we’ll be fine as long as they don’t have *too* huge a swarm.”

Five cruisers and one battleship could easily mop up a larger swarm of crystals. Unless they had something like thirty medium life-forms, one hundred small life-forms, or a big one, we’d be sitting pretty. Besides, if a fight broke out that we couldn’t handle, we could use interstellar comms to request help from recon units in nearby systems.

“Zip it,” Elma finally cut in. “Keep talking like that, Hiro, and you’ll make the huge swarm appear.”

“Hey, hey, that’s not how it works! I think. I hope not.”

“We’re done for…” Mimi groaned.

“Looks like we should be ready for the worst.” Elma sighed.

“Stop! It really will happen if you say that!”

“Don’t try to pin it on us, bub.”

We passed the blame around as we waited in the *Krishna*’s cockpit.

***

The Second Reconnaissance Unit—Serena's Pirate-Hunting Unit plus us mercenaries—took a hyperlane from the Izulux System to the frontier sector with other recon units.

We first reached the Pax System, which was directly adjacent to the Izulux System. Our four recon units split up, investigated that system, and quickly confirmed that there were no crystal life-forms present.

There were three hyperlanes that extended from the Izulux System and through the Pax System. Our four units split up into two groups and investigated them separately.

We overheard a discussion between the First Reconnaissance Unit's commander and our unit's commander—who was Serena, of course.

"It'd be best if our two units worked in tandem so we can back each other up if we run into unexpected trouble."

"I agree. When we're ready to move to the next system, it would be ideal for one unit to take the lead and make sure the route out is secure."

"Yes. The other unit can scout out an escape route in the meantime. We can alternate taking the lead."

"Let us do just that."

With that decision made, the first and second units proceeded carefully through the frontier sector.

We continued on like that for about thirty-six hours after leaving the Izulux System's imperial outpost. That's when trouble struck.

"Sector C is being pushed back! They've sent a request for aid!" Mimi shouted.

"Tell Mei we're fine out here and to offer them covering fire. They'll have to make do with that."

"Understood!"

I weaved through the swarm of small crystal life-forms and used continuous flak cannon fire to destroy the ones that had broken off from the horde to block my escape route. When they shattered, bits of crystals smacked into the *Krishna*'s shield and bounced off.

"I knew this would happen!" Elma screamed.

“It’s been more than twenty-four hours since I said it! Isn’t there a statute of limitations on this kind of thing?!”

Thirty-six hours after our departure, in the fourth frontier sector away, the Second Reconnaissance Unit searching the Gargaul System encountered crystal life-forms and charged into battle. The aliens had been waiting in ambush near the hyperlane exit.

Our unit used interstellar comms to request aid from the first unit, which had been standing by in the Lisimus System, which we had just passed through. Fortunately, it only took about fifteen minutes to travel between them, so we would make it as long as we held our ground until they arrived.

And what had *we* done amid the chaos? Our *Krishna* had plunged into the swarm as bait in order to protect the battleships and cruisers, and the *Black Lotus* hung back with the larger ships to prevent the crystals from closing in on them.

Crystal life-forms liked to go for whatever prey was closest, so if I just fired flak and heavy lasers at them while zooming around, I could drag a pretty big train behind me. Also, if I destroyed a few as I flew by, the crystals around them would join in and become hostile toward me, allowing me to draw even more enemies away from the other ships.

“We’ve got a ridiculous number of crystals tailing us now!”

“It’s okay. Not a problem.”

This swarm of crystals was much smaller than the ones we fought in the Izulux System, but our fighting forces were also far fewer. If this turned into an uncontrolled shoot-out, large ships with many blind spots would be the first to go down. It was my job to keep this from turning into a free-for-all.

I changed our attitude-control thrusters from auto to manual, built up momentum, and turned the ship around to face the crystals pursuing us.

“Ora ora ora ora!”

I fired the four heavy laser cannons and two flak cannons wildly into the crystals beelining toward us. They completely filled our field of vision, so I didn’t need to aim; every shot would hit something.

“M-Master Hiro! Up ahead! Or, um, up…behind?! Crystals!”

“No sweat.”

Still firing at the mob chasing us, I used our attitude-control thrusters to slip around the crystal life-forms coming at us from every other direction. It was easy to see them coming on the radar, so all I had to do was swing the ship out of the way.

What’s that? Do I not need to pay attention to what’s in front of us, you ask? Don’t be silly; everything I fire will hit something, so I can just check with my periphery at most.

***

“Captain? Is that…?”

“What is the meaning of this?”

Robertson and I were speechless on the bridge of the *Lestarius*.

His ship had plunged into the swarm of crystals and come out dragging a huge tail of them behind him, which was already stunning enough. But he hadn’t stopped there. He’d turned and begun firing into the crowd chasing him, all in the very center of their swarm.

He was flying backward at jaw-dropping speed and using his heavy cruiser-like firepower to cull their numbers, all while using incomprehensible maneuvers to weave through the other crystals flying at him from all directions. Before he could be fully surrounded, he burst forth from the swarm and dragged even more crystals behind him.

“That Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge isn’t just for show.”

“Honestly… What I’d give to get a look inside his head.”

It was already insane to charge into a swarm of crystals. To begin counterattacking while behind enemy lines on top of that… No. Now wasn’t the time to be amazed by his fancy flying. I needed to gather myself and focus on commanding.

“We mustn’t waste his efforts. Focus our firepower on Sector A to drive them back. Have the mercenaries assist in Sector C.”

“Roger!”

Light tore through Sector B, obliterating the crystals pursuing his ship. It seemed he’d thrown an anti-ship reactive torpedo into their midst.

“The First Reconnaissance Unit should arrive soon, as well. Have we managed to hold our ground?”

He continued to assail the swarm of crystal life-forms and their numbers visibly shrunk. It was too early to let our guard down, but it seemed we would make it out of here in one piece.

***

“That was a thrill, eh?”

“…Yeah.”

“…I suppose.”

Elma and Mimi answered dutifully, but I could tell they were wiped. They weren’t used to fighting crystals yet. As long as you avoided their attempts to slam into you, their firepower wasn’t that strong. They honestly weren’t that scary of an enemy! And they didn’t use any sort of strategy, either. That said—it was still thrilling to fight them, since one mistake could spell your end.

After that, the First Reconnaissance Unit arrived to help as planned, allowing us to survive the crystals’ ambush in one piece. I knew I wouldn’t have as much prey once they arrived, so I’d lobbed one of my beloved anti-ship torpedoes into the enemy to get in a whole bunch of kills beforehand. The Imperial Fleet would pay for what I used out here, so it would be a waste to be too stingy with them. We had backup ammunition on the *Black Lotus* as well, so I wanted to really rack up some kill numbers on this little recon trip.

We hadn’t agreed on any kill-based bonuses beforehand, but if I really hit it out of the park, I could expect *some* kind of bonus. Probably. Pressing the lieutenant commander a bit after this whole shebang was over might help out in that regard.

While I pondered possibly strategies, I maneuvered the *Krishna* to the *Black Lotus*'s underside and activated the auto-docking system.

"Bring us in, Mei."

"Of course. Opening the hatch."

The *Black Lotus*'s hatch opened, and we automatically parked ourselves in the hangar. *Mmm, there's nothing like auto-docking. Look at that reliability! No chance of an accident… Well, sometimes it has accidents. Sometimes. But not with ships as small as the* Krishna*, unless there's something really strange going on.*

"C'mon, girls, we've docked," I said. Mimi and Elma heaved a huge sigh. Had they managed to relax all that tension? "It should be smooth sailing now since we've eradicated most of the enemies around here. But there might be other swarms in this system, and they might bring reinforcements from neighboring systems. Rest up so you can be ready for anything."

"How can you still have so much energy…?" Elma groaned.

"That fight was lukewarm at best to me. Heh! Ha ha ha ha!" I was actually pretty tired, but the whole engagement was barely twenty minutes long. "Anyway, get used to this. Small crystals are basically just slow seeker missiles, if it help to think of it like that."

"Is that true…?" Mimi asked weakly.

"It is. You can't dodge lasers, but they're nowhere near as fast as lasers. They can't take tight turns like seeker missiles can, either. As long as you don't panic, you can take 'em down no problem."

"O-oh…?" Mimi seemed unconvinced.

"Anyway, take a break, girls. I'll tell Tina and Wiska we need maintenance and ammo."

"All yours…"

"Yes, sir…"

I left the two knackered girls in the cockpit and climbed down to the *Black Lotus*'s hangar. I hadn't taken any damage, but it was mighty convenient to be able to totally replenish our ammo at times like this.

Expensive as the Black Lotus *was, I'm glad I bought it*, I thought to myself as I stepped onto the floor of the hangar.

***

The Second Reconnaissance Unit had only sustained minor casualties. The only damage taken by our main force, the Pirate-Hunting Unit, was some slight scuffing on the hulls of the two frontline corvettes that had their shields pierced at the start of the ambush. No human lives were lost among the military ships.

But two mercenary ships had fallen, and three people on those ships had died. They'd been quick to flee as soon as the crystals appeared, and inadvertently charged right into the very shoot-out that ended them. Other ships among the fleet were damaged but not sunk, so they were receiving quick repairs in ships that contained hangars and maintenance facilities.

I saw a familiar glare across the hangar.

"We just keep running into each other," I joked.

"…Tch."

"Did you just 'tch' me?!"

The person who had come to the *Black Lotus* for maintenance was the same young mercenary I'd spoken to at the award ceremony. You know, the guy who had tried to assault me on the way out. *Actually, I never got his name…did I?*

"Oh, we haven't introduced ourselves, have we? Name's Hiro."

"…Wade."

I offered a handshake, but he ignored it. *You little shit… I'm dealing with you like a mature adult, okay?* But getting angry wouldn't help anything and picking a fight would be even more of a waste of time.

"Okay, okay, fine… You want a drink? Some water?"

"No thanks."

The young mercenary—Wade, apparently—glared at me. This guy was a lost cause. But if he didn't want my attention, there was no reason for me to give it to him. The *Krishna*'s maintenance and resupply were complete, so I was left twiddling my thumbs until the next battle.

"Well, I'll be off getting some rest on my ship. If you need anything, tell the dwarf twins performing maintenance here."

No reply.

Why did he have such a bad attitude? Jealousy? I had outperformed him in battle, and I had a huge mothership, *and* I had bombshells like Mimi, Elma, and Mei on board. I could see why he would be jealous! Ha ha ha! *Who, me? No, I'm not mad! Not mad at all, nope.*

I returned to the cockpit with a big grin plastered all over my face and found Mimi and Elma, who seemed to have recovered somewhat, gazing vacantly at something on the monitor.

"What're you looking at?" I asked them.

"It's the total battle data from that encounter just now. You did it! This ship is the top ace."

"That's incredible, Master Hiro!"

"Ha ha ha! Isn't it? Go on, praise me more."

My anger from before disappeared in the blink of an eye. Looking back, there was no reason to get so worked up over that young guy's jealousy and rudeness. Though if he really started a fistfight, I wasn't above punching back.

"What's the matter?" Elma tilted her head quizzically; I guess she could tell something was up. I didn't usually react to praise the way I did just now—was that how she'd figured it out?

"A young mercenary who came for ship repairs was kind of a brat to me, that's all. Don't worry about it," I replied. I sat back in the pilot's seat and compared the data from the battle. I'd defeated 153 enemies, huh? "Looks like the torpedoes with the adjusted explosion range worked just as Elma planned."

"They did! We really took down a bunch with that one," said Mimi.

“Not to be overly humble, but it was your own idea, Hiro. It was also only possible because of how you can drag those things behind you, attack them, and keep evading at the same time. It’s more your accomplishment than mine. I couldn’t handle crazy maneuvers like those.”

“They’re not crazy. Anyone could do it with enough training.”

“Yeah, whatever you say.” She brushed off my claims.

Why? You really could if you put in the effort! It’s just watching the radar, predicting enemy movements, and avoiding their paths. You can do that! You could even use slow seeker missiles to practice.

“I have an update on our schedule,” Mimi said. “It looks like we’ll be staying here for a little while to rest and rebuild before we set an ambush of our own.”

“An ambush?”

“Yes. This star system is a hub with four hyperlanes running through it, so we’ll be using it to see which direction the crystal life-forms come from and if there are any others lying in wait here. Also, they plan to search for the remains of other recon teams.”

“I see.”

“Another thing: they want to prepare for any more ambushes like today’s by concentrating our firepower. From now on, both units will work in lockstep with each other.”

“Okay, I get that.”

Our backup had made it in time today because they were a short distance away by hyperlane, but if we’d been far enough away that the other recon unit had needed a few hours to get to us, the Second Reconnaissance Unit might’ve suffered major losses. I would’ve been able to farm a higher score myself, but a situation like that also would’ve potentially put the *Black Lotus* in danger.

“I feel like not spreading your forces too thin by going in one by one is the most basic of basics…” I mumbled.

“I dunno,” Elma disagreed. “Sticking too close together could mean losing an entire force in one fell swoop if you’re careless. We’re just here

for recon, so I don't think it's wrong to have a group that moves forward and a group that hangs back to ensure that we'll be able to report back."

"If the situation gets too hot, we could always have some ships hold the line so others can get away. If we really want to prioritize surviving to report back, then why not do that?"

"But that means everyone dies except for a handful of ships, right? If we have two groups, then half of us survive because only the forward group went down. Besides, even with half the forces, we could still buy time for a few ships to escape."

"It's not as if splitting into two units will give us an advantage over the enemy. It raises the risk of our own forces getting cut down, too… Meh. It's a tough choice. Either way, the military already made the decision, so it's up to us to obey."

"Fair."

Just as my strategy discussion with Elma came to a close, we received a call.

Mimi opened the communication line from the console. "This is the *Krishna*. Yes, yes. Please wait just a moment… Master Hiro?"

"Hm? What's up? Who's calling?"

"It's Lieutenant Commander Serena. I'll put her up on the monitor."

"Got it."

A call from Serena? Wonder what she wants? I thought. But it wouldn't do to let her see my confusion.

A moment later, Lieutenant Commander Serena came up on the cockpit's main monitor. As usual, she was in her sleek, white military uniform.

She skipped the pleasantries and said, "First, I'd like to congratulate you for earning top ace. You seem more energetic than I expected you would be."

"Thanks. You look like you're holding up pretty well yourself."

"Of course. That was far from enough to wear me down."

“That’s an elite of the Imperial Fleet for you. So, to what do I owe the pleasure?” I decided to get right down to business. I didn’t want to somehow make any weird promises through small talk.

“Impatient, I see. That is so very like you. No need to be on guard, it’s nothing major.”

“I sure hope not. Go on.”

“We plan to take a twenty-four-hour break, so I am proposing to treat the man with the Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge to a meal.”

“A meal, huh? I doubt it’ll be any better than the food we have here.”

“I’ll ask you to overlook that. We have liquor, too…”

“You know I don’t drink, right?” I was such a lightweight that one beer could get me wasted. Liquor did not tempt me in the slightest.

“Well, call it special treatment for our top ace. Or a reward, perhaps. It’s the finest cuisine the *Lestarius* has to offer.”

“I’d rather have cash than a meal…”

“Of course you’ll be paid, too. We need to offer rewards in order to keep up morale, you know.” Serena grinned widely. *Okay, makes sense.*

“So do you plan to publicize what perks the top ace received, and how much of a bonus he got? Sounds like I’m going to be the target of lots of jealous eyes.”

“Why not let us publicize them? Your exploits are certainly worth sharing. In truth, people would question the Imperial Fleet’s generosity and benevolence if we didn’t properly reward you. We wouldn’t want any rumors flying about that the Imperial Fleet, known all throughout the galaxy, did not reward its top ace.”

“In other words, I have no grounds on which to refuse.”

“I wouldn’t go that far, but we *really* would prefer you accept.”

I heaved a sigh at the sight of Serena’s flawless smile and glanced at Elma in the co-pilot’s seat next to me.

“Doesn’t seem like you have much of a choice,” she shrugged.

Next, I looked to Mimi.

“I’d love to try the Imperial Fleet’s finest cuisine!”

“No surprises there…” I sighed. Mimi was a woman on a mission. But I was slightly interested in their finest cuisine too. “All right, I accept your offer. When should I drop by?”

“I’m glad to hear it. Please come to the *Lestarius*’s hangar in an hour and a half. Will you three be the only ones attending?”

“We’ll need to leave Mei on the *Black Lotus*, and the mechanics are slammed with repairs on the mercenary ships. It’ll be just us.”

“Understood. I will see you then. Make sure you wear your badge, please.” With that final instruction, Serena cut off communications.

In the silence, the only thing audible in the cockpit was my heavy sigh. “She’s really determined to make me one of them, huh?”

“I wouldn’t say that, but…well, if you plan to continue as a mercenary, you’ll have to work alongside the military. Thinking of it as networking.”

“Think so? Well I just hope they give us good food.”

“Yeah!”

“Yep. Good liquor, too.”

Mimi and Elma were clearly ready to party. As for me, well…I honestly felt it was nothing but trouble when big shots called me to dinner. I couldn’t help but sigh again.

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“Please enjoy your meal. Leave managing the ship to me.”

“Urgh, liquooor… I wanna go, too…”

“Sis… Um, don’t you worry. We’ll get the job done!”

Mei, Tina, and Wiska said their goodbyes, and Mimi, Elma, and I headed to the flagship of the Second Reconnaissance Unit, *Lestarius*.

I felt uneasy about letting rough-and-tumble mercenaries come onto the ship with only Mei, Tina, and Wiska aboard… *No, I'm sure those three will be fine. There's no human alive who could beat Mei in a fight, and Tina and Wiska are stronger than I am. They'll be fine.* In truth, when it came to unarmed combat, I was the second-weakest person on the ship next to Mimi.

I piloted the *Krishna* through space while I meditated on these meaningless worries. The universe around us was a beautiful sight. Imperial Fleet and mercenary ships alike dotted the sector, and no mercenary ship was the same, making for an interesting variety of sights.

To be more precise, there were *some* duplicate ship models, but their customizations and paint jobs were all unique. Some were so tricked-out you wouldn't recognize the original model within, some had weird thorn-like protrusions, and some had wing-shaped stabilizers as if they planned to fly like birds.

Of course, some models stayed pretty close to their base specs. Some people just didn't like changing their ship much. Personally, I didn't mind wildly changing the appearance of my ship if necessary. Before I'd obtained the *Krishna*, my favorite ship had been customized so much that it looked nothing like the original model. I hadn't put any pointless stabilizers on it, though.

Back in *Stella Online*, I had friends who'd put spike-like stabilizers and other turn-of-the-century "badass" artifacts on their ships. Speaking of "badass" mods, I definitely wasn't a fan of the people who made their thrusters shoot fire like flamethrowers. Though I had to admit, they were a *little* useful. The fire made it difficult for others to gauge how much thruster output you were using at any given moment… *Okay, I'd better stop thinking about that.*

"That ship is so cool…" Mimi cooed in admiration.

"Ew…"

"Uhh…"

When Elma and I looked at the ship Mimi was gazing at, we were both disgusted. I mean, it was covered in pointless spikes and screws, and the bow was decorated with a skull. Mimi *would* like something like that. If

I’d left the *Krishna*’s customization to her, it would have probably ended up looking like this monstrosity.

“I prefer a more sharp and tasteful design, honestly,” Elma said.

“Even though you don’t care about the interior?”

“I’ll be pickier about the interior next time.”

The exterior of Elma’s previous ship had been sleek and beautiful, though apparently she’d left the interior pretty crude due to some odd mercenary hang-up. It seemed Elma preferred form over function.

We continued discussing the mercenary ships in this sector as we closed in on the *Lestarius*.

All along the way, I’d been scanned from every direction. People *would* find it suspicious if an undamaged ship was heading straight for the flagship while everyone else was standing by. The *Krishna* was a rare ship, too. I didn’t mind being scanned right now, so I left it alone.

Mimi sent a docking request to the *Lestarius*, and it was quickly accepted. We’d arrived a little earlier than planned, but it seemed word had already spread. I flew the ship through the *Lestarius*’s docking hatch and activated the auto-docking program for a smooth parking job. I heard Elma mutter something along the lines of “it’s just wrong,” but I ignored it. She was such a manual docking supremacist.

“Okay, we’re here. Let’s get going.”

“Okay!”

“…Sure.”

Mimi had a big smile on her face in anticipation of the Imperial Fleet’s “finest cuisine,” but Elma appeared oddly dispirited. Had my auto-docking offended her that much? *Just give up and accept that it’s convenient, jeez.*

I double-checked that the Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge was pinned to my jacket, donned the sword belt that held both my long and short swords, and walked at the front of my party. Ever since I obtained the Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge, I’d been wearing the swords as Mei instructed instead of just my laser gun. I didn’t like it, since it made me stand out so much, but because people awarded this badge were treated as knights under imperial law, it seemed this was the best move if we wanted to avoid unnecessary trouble.

Since Mei had been the one to suggest it, and Elma hadn't raised any objections, I obeyed…but I lived in constant fear that some overbearing noble would challenge me to a duel to the death or something.

Not to mention I wasn't much of a swordsman, so it was a sure bet that I'd get my ass kicked by any real noble with a taste for swordplay. *I'd better have Mei teach me some basics sooner rather than later… Actually, that makes me think. Why not leave both the badge and the swords at home when I go out?*

Feeling the weight of the swords on my hip now more than ever, I climbed down from the *Krishna*. A soldier was standing by to show us to dinner.

"Welcome to the *Lestarius*," he said. "Allow me to be your guide."

"Thank you. Lead the way."

After exchanging pleasantries, we followed the soldier through the *Lestarius*'s interior. I was already familiar with the ship—it was practically like an old friend's house by now. I'd walked through here countless times when I taught Serena and her unit how to fight pirates.

"Everyone seems so busy," Mimi observed.

"The battle just ended. There must be a lot of cleanup work."

"Is it okay for us to be wined and dined while everyone's working so hard?"

"The feast is part of the cleanup process," Elma explained. "It's them posturing about rewarding their top ace."

"I see…"

We walked and talked for a while until we reached the senior officers' dining hall. It was reserved for Lieutenant Commander Serena and the other higher-ups on the *Lestarius*.

"Although to be frank, the captain and the others rarely dine here," the soldier said.

It seemed it was uncommon even for people who *could* use this fancy dining hall to actually eat their meals here. Even though the higher-ups of

the *Lestarius* had many meetings over meals, there weren't enough of them to warrant the use of such a big, fancy room. *Makes sense.*

"Then why bother setting aside a room like this then?" I asked.

"They have to," Elma said. "Some nobles insist on it."

"Ah, so you've got some real blue bloods out there."

"You got it," said Elma, "To keep up with the demands of that type, any large ship that could be used as a flagship comes standard with a senior officer dining hall. Serena may not use it much, but the next captain might."

"Uh-huh…"

Mimi and I listened closely as Elma shared her mysterious knowledge of nobles. Before long, we entered the dining hall and took our assigned seats. Since we'd arrived a little early, Lieutenant Commander Serena was nowhere in sight.

"Even the furniture looks expensive!" Mimi cried.

"It's like a high-class restaurant. By the way, I don't trust my table manners in a place this swanky. Heck, I don't even know how to use cutlery properly," I admitted.

You start at the outside and go in, right? That's about all I remember. Frankly, any average Joe living in Japan didn't have much opportunity to learn their way around table etiquette. Whenever I ate out, I always went for gyudon, udon, or ramen. If I was in the mood to really splurge, I'd go to a sit-in restaurant, steakhouse, or revolving sushi place. I'd never eaten something like French or Italian food.

"It's not a formal banquet, so I don't think they'll be super picky about manners. As long as you don't do anything insane, like eating with your hands or licking your plate, I'm sure you'll be fine."

"Even I wouldn't do that." *I wasn't raised by wolves, you know.*

"Even you," Mimi giggled.

"There are all kinds of mercenaries out there," Elma said with a shrug. "You're one of the classier ones in that regard, Hiro. You don't drink or do drugs, you don't waste your money on gambling, and you don't go to

brothels. Most mercenaries would think you're a snob or pretending to be stoic."

"I don't see myself as either of those." I'd already lost the right to be snobby or stoic the moment I started taking turns with Mimi, Elma, and Mei. I didn't drink because I was a lightweight, and I just wasn't interested in drugs or gambling.

"Master Hiro, I think you're perfect just the way you are. You're a wonderful person."

"Yeah, you're all right," said Elma. "I don't wanna see you getting addicted to drink or drugs and losing everything you have."

"No worries there, trust me."

Right on cue, Serena entered the dining hall and cut in. "I would hope not. It would be a blow to our image if our Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge-bestowed hero turned out to be a good-for-nothing." That was oddly specific timing…had she been eavesdropping outside? Or, as I'm sure she'd call it, "monitoring the conversations in the room."

"Greetings, Lieutenant Commander. I was most honored to receive your invitation today." I rose from my seat, put a hand to my chest, and bowed reverently.

Serena grinned wryly in response. Mimi and Elma had stood alongside me.

"At ease, please. This isn't that formal. Besides, it makes my skin crawl when you act like that."

"Oh, thanks."

Behind Serena, three more people entered the dining hall. One was her aide, Lieutenant Robertson, while the others were officers I'd never seen before. One of them was a well-built middle-aged man, and the other was a woman about Serena's age. The well-built man wore a single sword at his hip, making it pretty clear that he was imperial nobility.

"Captain Wilbert Broadwell, leader of the First Reconnaissance Unit."

"Lieutenant Cecile Prant. I serve as Captain Broadwell's aide."

“Hello, nice to meet you. I’m Hiro, owner and captain of the *Krishna* and *Black Lotus*. This is my co-pilot, Elma, and our operator, Mimi.”

The head of the first unit and his aide, huh? I wondered why they were here. Since the first unit had come in to help with the battle, maybe it wasn’t that weird.

“Come, let’s not stand around chatting,” said Serena. “Shall we sit and have a toast?”

At Serena’s urging, everyone took their seat. *Now, how’s this meal gonna go?*

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“A toast to victory!”

“Cheers!”

As the highest-ranking military member here, Captain Broadwell took the lead and formally kicked off the meal.

I’d been wondering what the Imperial Fleet’s “finest cuisine” would be like, but there wasn’t anything unfamiliar in the meal. We received a Napolitan-like pasta dish, steak, and something like consommé in a mug.

Was this really supposed to be their finest cuisine? I cut into the steak and took a bite.

The meat was a little tough, but the more I chewed, the more the juices began to flow into my mouth. The fried garlic was fragrant, and the sliced onions cooked alongside it were perfect—*Wait.*

“They use real meat and vegetables…?” I mumbled to myself, finally realizing why Serena had called this their finest cuisine. I could make the same meal using food cartridges in our automatic cooker, but the real deal was on a whole ’nother level.

I looked over at Mimi, who was sampling the steak as well. There was a sparkle in her eye as she chewed.

“Oh ho. The bearer of the Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge also has a discerning palate. Now that *is* a surprise.”

“I wouldn’t call myself a gourmet. I have quite a few opportunities to eat real meat, and a certain member of my crew loves it.”

“M-Master Hiro…”

I looked back at Mimi. She seemed embarrassed to have so many eyes on her, but I liked seeing her enjoy her meal. Watching her put me in a good mood.

“Hmm…” Captain Broadwell seemed intrigued by my answer and Mimi’s reaction. *What’s his deal? If he has something to say, I wish he’d spit it out.*

Changing the subject, I asked, “Do we expect to continue the mission soon?”

“Of course. We’ve budgeted twelve hours to repair damaged ships and twelve more to rest. After twenty-four hours, we will resume the mission. At this moment, the undamaged ships are combing this star system,” Captain Broadwell said. His explanation reminded me of a certain crystal life-form quest line in *Stella Online.*

In the game, various ambush events, rout events, and investigation events had led to a base assault event. This stage would probably count as the investigation event, though I didn’t remember much about that part since mercenaries like me stayed out of it. That had been left to explorer-type players who made it their living searching for undiscovered star systems and planets.

“I see. I hope we can find some clues as to where the enemy is hiding.”

“You’re…not like most mercenaries, are you? I feel like I’m talking to a fellow military man or noble.”

“I understand exactly how Captain Broadwell feels,” Serena’s aide, Lieutenant Robertson, agreed as he cut into his own steak. “You’re oddly classy for a mercenary. Those rough edges one would expect seem altogether missing.”

If I was giving the impression of class, then I had to wonder just how crude the average mercenary acted.

“I don’t see why, myself…” I replied in an attempt at humility.

“I’ll bet the ladies accompanying you would agree with us,” said Lieutenant Prant.

“Sure would,” said Elma. “He replaced all the furniture in the ship to make it more like a first-class cruise liner’s cabin, and he’s been a total gentleman with us.” Mimi nodded along wordlessly.

Huh…? Gentleman? I’ve definitely laid my hands on both of you, and I wouldn’t consider myself a gentleman in the slightest. Do they think of me that way? Honestly?

“It kind of feels like everyone here is trying to gang up on me… Can we stop talking about me for a while?”

“If you insist. Then, would you mind if I asked you something out of my own personal interest?” Captain Broadwell asked me.

“I’ll answer anything I’m able to.”

What now? Is this an interrogation? I get Serena throwing me to the wolves, but can’t Mimi or Elma jump in to save me?

“That ship you pilot…the *Krishna*, I believe? Where did you procure it? I happen to know quite a bit about ships, but I’ve never seen or heard of one like that. I understand that mercenaries tend to remodel and rebuild until the ship’s original form is unfathomable, but the design of that one seems outright otherworldly.”

A fastball right out of the gate.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t share that information. When I was given the ship, I promised never to tell anyone where I’d gotten it. In fact, I don’t even know where the person who gave it to me is now.”

“Hmm…then might I take a look later?”

“Sure… As long as you’re just looking.”

“I see. Then after this meal, I would love to examine it.” Captain Broadwell seemed satisfied.

I hoped that I could take his smile at face value. He wasn’t trying to make the *Krishna* his, was he? I looked to Serena for reassurance.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “A member of the Imperial Fleet would never rob a mercenary of his ship.”

“Hm? I wasn’t thinking of doing any such thing,” Broadwell protested.

“Captain Broadwell is an expert on small craft. Everyone here knows him as a maniac for small ships, but that may not be as well-known among mercenaries. As Captain Broadwell is son of the great Count Broadwell—a noble, in other words—I believe it’s natural for Sir Hiro to be a little wary.” Serena explained the point of her remark with a helpless smile.

Captain Broadwell pouted and scratched his head guiltily. “I suppose I didn’t consider the implications. Sir Hiro, my request comes purely out of personal curiosity, so you needn’t worry. Actually, would you and your lady friends be willing to take a holo-photograph with me at the *Krishna*? I’m building a collection of holo-photos with rising mercenaries and their ships.”

“S-sure. I guess…that’s fine?”

He seemed so earnest that I couldn’t help but acquiesce. Mimi and Elma consented as well, though flabbergasted by the request. It was agreed; after our meal, we would take a trip to the *Krishna* for a photoshoot.

What had I just agreed to?

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The meal proceeded peacefully from there, and I was given one million Ener as a special reward. One could also say the trip to the *Krishna* ended more or less without incident. *I mean…one could, right? I wish.*

“So the frame bursts open gloriously, and the large flak cannon emerges! This weapons system is revolutionary. I’ve never seen anything like it. It has so many attitude-control thrusters, too. Using a powerful generator must improve your mobility immensely, but it’s quite the brute-force maneuver… Is this an experimental vessel?”

The big man muttered to himself, using his holo-camera to snap photos as he ran all around the *Krishna*. It was honestly sight to behold. He even turned down the gravity in the hangar so he could take pictures from

above. I guess they weren't joking about Captain Broadwell being an outright small-craft maniac.

In the end, he took a photo with me, Mimi, and Elma standing together with the *Krishna* behind us. Then he took another with him in the picture alongside us.

"Goodness, what a lovely photoshoot! Thank you." Seeing this large man flash a big, satisfied smile, as if to say that he'd achieved all his worldly goals, was certainly striking.

"What an odd person," Mimi said.

"Shh. You can't just say that out loud," I warned her.

"I think you're being just as rude…" Elma rolled her eyes.

On that day, I learned that the military was full of weirdos.

Chapter 7:
Pulling Out

AFTER THE DINNER PARTY, we took a short break and resupplied before setting out on a patrol around the star system. The undamaged small craft had been pressed into service as scouts. Of course, all I had to do was fly around leisurely while Mimi and Elma watched the radar, so it was easy enough. Even the girls' monitoring work wasn't especially hard. We were ready to ring the alarm if we sensed any signs of crystal life-forms or any other odd signals, but other than that, they didn't have to watch too carefully.

"It's so peaceful out here."

"But if crystal life-forms appear, it'll be hell in an instant."

"Urk…well, *now* it doesn't feel peaceful at all."

I continued guiding us through the system as I listened to Mimi and Elma's carefree conversation. Other small ships were patrolling and searching ahead of us—they were the real scouting unit—so we were just there for moral support.

"This is kind of a break, anyway," I said to them. "There are plenty of other ships out on recon, so it's not as if we'll be the ones to run into any crystals."

"Hiro…why do you keep saying stuff like that?"

"Master Hiro, please stop jinxing us…"

"Excuse me? Can you stop with this narrative that I'm some omen of doom?"

Sure, sometimes, I say I wish something wouldn't happen and it does. It's happened a few times, even! But that can't be the case all *the time, now can it? Besides, there's no way specialized information-gathering vessels would miss traces that the* Krishna *can pick up with its subpar intelligence capabilities.*

“Since you said it, I’m terrified that the alarm’s gonna go off any minute now.”

“Ha ha ha! As if.”

“But based on past experience—”

Mimi was interrupted by an electronic alert blaring through the cockpit. The atmosphere in the ship became tense.

“Umm…hey, no!” I shouted. “Don’t look at me like that!”

“Just hurry up and get in there.”

To escape Elma’s glare, I turned around and checked my console. Mei’s face was displayed on the corner of the cockpit’s main monitor.

“Master, Imperial Fleet scouts have confirmed signs of crystal life-forms warping out into this star system. They’ve issued a command for all ships in this system to gather. Sending you coordinates of the rendezvous point now.”

“Is the *Black Lotus* going, too?”

“Yes. We will move alongside the Imperial Fleet’s ships and meet up with you at the rendezvous point.”

“Understood,” I replied. “See you there.”

Mei bowed onscreen and hung up.

“Look…” I said, fishing for an excuse. “Our ship didn’t find them, so it doesn’t count.”

“It counts.”

“I think it counts, too. Look at the timing.”

Well, I think my crew is a little too hard on me.

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The rendezvous point was on the opposite side of the star in the center of this system, so by the time we arrived, almost all the ships in the system were already there.

“They sure are ready to gang up on the enemy as soon as they warp out,” I mused.

“This is what you do when you know they’re coming,” Elma replied.

Battleships, cruisers, and other ships with long-range capabilities like the *Black Lotus* had surrounded their expected warp-out destination in a semicircle. Their plan was to blow the crystals to smithereens as soon as they appeared.

“What’s our position?”

“Behind the air defense destroyers placed at the front,” Mimi answered. “Once they finish firing on the crystals, we are to jump out front and fight a defensive battle.”

“Roger that.”

“So we’re going right into the swarm again…”

“If we need to, yeah.”

If there was an opening for that kind of move, I would do it. But if it looked like the aliens would overwhelm us the moment we went in, I would absolutely not. If you jumped into a space with an even spread of crystal life-forms, they would close in from all directions and crush you. It might look like I was jumping in at random, but it took a surprising amount of visual assessment to charge in solo like that. I wouldn’t recommend it for beginners.

“When are they expected to warp out?” I asked.

“In under two minutes and thirty seconds.”

“Pretty soon. Activate weapons system and begin checks.”

“Aye aye. Beginning checks.”

I booted up our weapons system while Elma started the sub-system checks. Our maintenance and resupplying were complete, so we shouldn’t run into any issues, but you always had to be sure.

While the checks ran, the warp-out time approached.

“Prepare all cannons! Firing coordinates—what?! Cease fire! Cease at once!” Captain Broadwell screamed over comms.

What was going on over there at the warp-out point? It wasn't a swarm of crystals that appeared; it was a medium-sized battleship with its armor crushed on one side. It looked like a mercenary ship. The thing was really torn up—and it was in the process of being devoured by crystal.

More tattered, crystal-covered ships warped out after them. Almost all were mercenary ships, but Imperial Fleet ships emerged as well. If anything, they were in even worse shape than the mercenaries.

"Scout ships, continue gathering information as ordered previously. All others, retreat to the star and reform. All ships, change course!" On Captain Broadwell's orders, we turned and pulled back to the star.

"Those are the Third and Fourth Reconnaissance Units we split up with earlier, aren't they?" Mimi noted.

"Yeah. They must've lost to the crystals and retreated."

"Looks like they ran like hell regardless of how it'd look." There were clearly fewer ships than had left originally.

The systems here were all unexplored frontier systems, but the hyperlane connections between them were known to some extent thanks to observational technology such as hyperspace radar. The third- and fourth-unit survivors had used that data to estimate which system we were searching and retreated in this direction.

"What happens next?"

"Good question. The third and fourth units had similar fighting power to the first and second, so if they sustained that much damage, I would guess we'll perform emergency repairs on the damaged ships and pull back to the Izulux System to rebuild our forces. Then, we'll head to the system where the third and fourth units got trounced and fight those crystals. Otherwise…"

"Otherwise, we retreat and abandon the mission entirely," Elma added with a shrug. "If bringing the fight to the crystals means sending out the whole Imperial Fleet and losing a bunch of ships, it might be safer to go back to the Izulux System with its interceptor weapons and wait there."

"Huh? Is that feasible?" Mimi furrowed her brow at Elma's words.

Mimi was a commoner of the Grakkan Empire. She was used to the government refusing to assist its citizens and distrusted the Grakkan Empire government quite a bit. She still respected the Imperial Fleet for trying to protect its citizens—though interacting with Lieutenant Commander Serena so often might be chipping away at the "respect" part…

"With losses this heavy? The first and second units are pretty intact, but the third and fourth are almost annihilated. Just from a visual estimate, I'd say thirty percent are stardust, while the other seventy percent are too damaged to continue."

"Looks like it," I agreed. "From a practical perspective, they're basically annihilated." They couldn't perform any unified counterattacks like that. They'd pretty much crawled back on hands and knees.

"Umm…does that mean our job is done?" Mimi asked us.

"We'll probably have to go back to the Izulux System, if nothing else," I said. "There's no way they'll keep up the search as planned. Especially not when they've got information from those beaten-up ships."

What happened after that would depend on the Imperial Fleet. We still had plenty of time left on our contract, but unless they sortied again, they'd end up paying us a whole lot of money to sit around. Then the contract would run out, and we'd be free again.

"Worst case for us is we go back, they reform, and then decide to strike out again," Elma noted.

"Ha ha ha… If they do that, we're certain to end up in the offensive force."

The *Krishna* had made a huge splash in the fight against the crystals, after all. The *Black Lotus* had performed admirably as a supply ship and gunship as well, since it had skilled engineers and complete maintenance facilities on board. If they were going back out, they had no reason to let us go—our contract was good for many more weeks.

"…I hope they release us," Mimi said.

"Yeah."

"Same."

That sure would be nice… Ha ha ha…

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We'd waited on guard for crystals to come in pursuit of the third and fourth units, but in the end, they never appeared. If they had followed the fleet ships, the first and second units would have had to fight so the others could escape, and that would have been a pretty difficult battle.

Either way, the wounded third and fourth units wouldn't even be able to retreat without repairs, so the *Krishna* was forced to relinquish the *Black Lotus*'s hangar for the time being. Only two small craft could fit in there, so the *Krishna* would've taken up one precious spot that a ship undergoing maintenance could use.

"Would you calm down?" Elma demanded.

"What? How do you mean?"

"You look so worried, Master Hiro," Mimi said. She looked concerned.

"…Mm."

I was just a little worried that the mercenaries, with emotions running high after being nearly killed by crystals, might try something funny with Tina and Wiska. I'd warned Mei a few times to be ready for anything, so they would probably be fine…but what if they weren't? If something happened to the twins and Mei—actually, Mei would probably be fine—I'd crush those assholes into space debris with my own two hands the moment they left the *Black Lotus*.

"You *seriously* don't need to be so worried," Elma reassured me. "The mercenaries here fear you more than you think."

"Why?" I couldn't think of any reason for them to be scared of me.

"Everyone knows you as the crazy bastard who jumped into the swarm of crystals solo and came out in one piece. And they're saying you had the most bored look on your face when you received the Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge, too."

“Well…I guess I wasn’t exactly cheering about it.” Probably because that ceremony was such a snooze fest. I suppose it was at least interesting to see that bird’s-eye view of the map.

“And that’s not all. People are spreading rumors that you’re a psycho who cares more about danger and thrill than money and reputation.”

“Oh, that’s hilarious.” Now that really was a laugh. Of *course* I cared more about money and reputation than danger and thrill. Like, maybe think for a second? I wasn’t some kind of weird battle junkie, sorry. “And where did you get this information?”

“That’s for me to know and you to find out.” Elma grinned, refusing to reveal her sources. Was there some kind of dark website where mercenaries exchanged info? “As little as they are, the twins are strong. They’ve also got the maintenance bots and Mei with them, so they’ll be totally fine.”

“I hope you’re right.”

I waited and worried in the *Krishna* until the maintenance of the damaged ships was complete. In the end, no one made any trouble for the twins and Mei. Far from it. According to Mei, the mercenaries had watched the tiny girls hard at work with innocent smiles on their faces.

Maybe because of my usual debauched lifestyle, I somehow found the thought of that even more criminal.

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“Aww, were ya worried about us, hon? You’re kinda sweet in your own way.”

“Aww…”

With the urgent maintenance completed, we returned to the *Black Lotus* just as the decision came down that we would retreat to the Izulux System. Back on our mothership, we all took a break with our hard-working mechanics.

“That’s not really… Okay, it’s kind of true,” I confessed. That smug grin on Tina’s face made me want to deny it, but her and Wiska’s joy at being worried over made it impossible.

“I did not think you would worry about me, too.” Mei seemed pleased as she served us in the lounge. She was totally expressionless, of course, but her aura felt soft.

Even while Mei served us in the lounge, she was able to fly the *Black Lotus* toward the Izulux System without issue. I didn’t know how she did that, but apparently she was controlling the ship via remote control somehow. *Does that not raise security concerns?* It made me wonder, but Mei wouldn’t do sloppy work. It was probably fine.

“In the end, I’m just glad nothing happened. That’s it.”

“Trying to change the subject, huh?” asked Tina.

“You don’t have to be shy,” said Elma.

“Can’t hear yooouuu. Anyway, let’s talk about what comes next.” I ignored their smirks and forged ahead. I couldn’t take any more teasing.

“There’s not much we can do aside from going back to the Izulux System and awaiting orders, is there?” Wiska cocked her head.

“I was thinking the same,” Mimi agreed.

They weren’t wrong; maybe I’d picked the wrong topic to distract them with. *No, it’s fine. I just have to keep on changing subjects.*

“That’s not what I mean. I mean protecting Tina and Wiska.” I turned to the twins. “Sure, dwarves are stronger than they look, but even you have limits. There might even come a day when pirates attack and board us. I’m thinking it might be a good idea to get you some fighting bots for defense.”

Now that we were talking about their safety, Tina and Wiska turned serious. “Do we need them that badly?”

“Preparing for the worst is a good policy…”

“What kind of fighting bots would you like me to procure?” Mei asked.

“A good balance of high-mobility ones that can get to a fight fast, and heavily armored types that can suppress people. The ability to suppress

rather than kill is a priority, I think."

"Then might I suggest security over fighting bots? And I presume you would prefer the top of the line, Master?"

"That's right."

I wouldn't pinch pennies when it came to Tina, Wiska, and Mei's safety. It would've been nice to have taken care of this back in the Vlad System, but the selection there wasn't great. The system had lots of high-quality tech, but when it came to androids and fighting bots, it seemed to be lacking. Did androids not mesh with dwarves? Then again, Tina and Wiska used maintenance bots… Well, I had no idea.

"Then perhaps, when we are finished with the crystal life-forms, our next destination should be a star system where we can buy such things," Mei suggested. "Miss Mimi and I will look into it later."

"Yeah! Leave it to us!" Mimi pumped her fist energetically. I could leave planning for our next destination to them.

"The *Krishna*'s checks are almost done," Wiska said. "We'll go finish the maintenance."

"See you soon, hon. We'll get the job done right."

With that, the twins waved and left the lounge. Mimi and Mei got ready to leave together to figure out our next destination. I could've joined them, but I'd rather ask after they decided. I was left with nothing to do.

"Wanna go back to the ship?" I suggested to Elma.

"Sure. I doubt anything will happen, but we just in case we have to scramble…"

I'd better find something to occupy myself when we're standing by like this. But I've offloaded information gathering and commerce to Mimi, and Tina and Wiska take care of maintenance items. Elma has a way of finding all the core info we need, too.

"Why force yourself to work?" Elma asked me. "Just take it easy. It's important to be rested and ready for the worst, y'know? Besides, you're the captain, so it's best you leave the details to your subordinates and be ready for action."

“Yeah! Master Hiro, you work too much!”

“I think so, too, Master. Instead of worrying about us, we wish you would direct that toward your own well-being.”

It wasn’t just Elma and Mimi—even Mei was telling me to rest. I wasn’t exactly tired, though, and even I didn’t fancy myself a workaholic. If anything, maybe it was because I was a frugal guy at heart; spending time doing nothing felt like wasting it.

“All right. I’ll be sitting around in the break room.”

“Good. Pilots need focus, so you have to rest your mind.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

If there was really nothing to do…maybe napping on the break room sofa would be nice. I made my way there, envisioning sweet dreams ahead.

Chapter 8:
Mimi and Rations

FORTUNATELY, once urgent repairs were complete, the withdrawal to the Izulux System went smoothly. We didn't run into any crystal life-forms, and we arrived safely back at the outpost. Then we waited around for a week for the military to do their stuff: everything from the repair and reformation of the damaged recon units, to analyzing the information they'd brought back, to strategizing over how to fight the crystal swarm.

During this time, we mercenaries were ordered to stand by and protect the Izulux System. We were still under contract, so as long as we didn't void the agreement ourselves, we were at their disposal.

Of course, voiding the contract without good reason would incur a penalty. Nonfulfillment meant they'd demand a large reparation sum, and your reputation as a mercenary would be donezo. I could pay off reparations, and I didn't care about my reputation, but only an idiot would void a contract when it wasn't even clear whether we would go back on the attack or not. If I voided it now and left, and then they decided they weren't attacking, I'd be out the penalty money for nothing.

This is all to say we would be spending a while in the Izulux System. Unfortunately, standing by in the Izulux System was extremely boring.

First off, we were sent a separate request through the mercenary guild to use the *Black Lotus*'s hangar to repair ships.

Our mothership's two small craft docks were cutting-edge, high-performance spaces manufactured by Space Dwergr itself. When it came to the maintenance of small ships, it was even better than the facilities at the Imperial Fleet's outpost. Moreover, we had two skilled engineers and several maintenance bots. The Imperial Fleet was more than willing to pay good money for access to our facilities.

The materials needed for maintenance would be paid for by the Imperial Fleet, and they would provide us 100,000 Ener per day for the request. The twins were the only ones doing this work, so I offered them a

30 percent cut—30,000 Ener per day. They eagerly accepted, of course. That pay scale came out to 1.5 million Japanese yen each per day, so I could see why.

Thus the *Black Lotus* was turned into a temporary maintenance dock out of the way of the outpost's other busy docks. Of course, that meant we had to leave the *Black Lotus*'s docks open, and with the other docks at the outpost full, the *Krishna* couldn't find space in either the *Black Lotus* or the outpost.

In other words, we were cooped up on board the *Krishna* and stuck out in space in the safe sector around the outpost. If any pirates were around, I'd be able to hunt them…but pirates would never come to the Izulux System, since it was home to nothing but an Imperial Fleet outpost. I was left with an abundance of free time.

Our only option was to kill time as a trio. Holo-movie viewings, competitive games on our tablets, and…well, you know. Let's just say the bed's cleaning functions and bath usage frequency went way up.

After some days of this boring-yet-fulfilling life of leisure, we were summoned back to the Imperial Fleet outpost. This time Lieutenant Commander Serena wasn't the one who had called us—it was Captain Broadwell.

"Emergency or not, it's wrong for us to leave our hero adrift in space," he had said. "Shabby though they may be, we do have some shops and amusement facilities. Rest here. If anyone gives you trouble, tell them I summoned you."

"How am I supposed to take this?" I asked Elma.

"Why read so deeply into it? He just took a shine to you."

"I'm not sure I like the sound of that… Well, at least Serena isn't coming at me this time. Sure, why not?"

I asked Mei about it as well, but she agreed with Elma, so I'd decided to accept Captain Broadwell's request.

"It's livelier than I expected!" Mimi chirped.

"Sure is. There are plenty of military people and ships here on the outpost. The more people you've got, the more food there is. The more

ships, the more you need materials for maintenance. And we all know the military is a major consumer of both."

We parked the *Krishna* in a hangar provided by Captain Broadwell and climbed out onto the outpost. As Mimi said, the place was surprisingly busy. Most of the bustling crowd seemed to consist of off-duty soldiers or mercenaries, but there were individuals here and there that didn't fit those descriptions. For example, that guy in the business suit was probably a merchant.

"Well, we're here. Where should we go first? The Canteen Post Exchange?" I asked the girls.

"Nah. They've got shops for civilians, too. I guess because shopping sort of counts as entertainment?"

Post exchanges were like shops run by the military. Soldiers are people, too, so they naturally need stuff for everyday life. Back in my world, I'd heard that exchanges sold stuff like clothes, underwear, stationery, food, sweets, alcohol, snacks, and other luxury items. Not that I'd never been to one, so I couldn't say for sure. But they sounded like big convenience stores to me.

I didn't know what post exchanges in this universe sold, but maybe they had things I'd never seen before? If I had the chance, I wouldn't mind to peek inside.

"Shopping is so much fun," Mimi said.

"Heck yeah!" Elma agreed.

While we chatted and strolled through the outpost, I felt eyes glancing at me. I suppose I stood out, what with my Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge, pair of swords, and pair of beauties to boot. I'd look too.

"It feels like people are watching us, doesn't it?" I asked.

"Oh? You're pretty perceptive these days, Mimi. They don't seem hostile, so I wouldn't worry," Elma answered.

"I can't tell whether they're hostile or not…" I said. "Do those pointy ears have likability sensors, or something?"

"Of course not, stupid." Elma glared at me and smacked my ass.

Reeeally? I figured elves might be able to do something like that.

"Oh, Master Hiro! There! Let's go there!" Mimi pointed at an imported goods shop.

Oh, yeah. Mimi does like that kind of stuff. Stores like this often had delicacies from faraway nations, so Mimi always gravitated toward them.

"That look all right, but I recommend that one over there, Mimi." Elma pointed in a different direction.

"Huh? Which one?" Mimi looked over quizzically. It was a military surplus shop. "Hmm…what sorts of stuff do they sell there?"

"Excess goods from the military. They sell all kinds of things, but I bet they'll have something you're interested in." Elma jogged ahead, leaving us to catch up with her.

"Oh ho, now this looks fun," I mused.

"This does seem like something you'd like, Master Hiro."

"Now I'm excited." Looking at military surplus really got my blood pumping. That said, the stuff here was all outdated excess stock, so it was two or three generations behind what the Imperial Fleet used these days.

Was there really demand for such old items at a military outpost? There was a surprising number of soldiers present. Maybe people liked retro stuff in this universe?

"Looks like this is it… Here." After wandering for a while, Elma arrived at a display of fleet combat rations.

"Are these Imperial Fleet rations?" asked Mimi.

"I see," I said. "Y'know, I'm a little interested myself."

These foods were meant to give soldiers the calories they needed to fight on the front lines. They had an extremely long shelf life and took little effort to prepare.

Food quality greatly affected morale, even in a universe where flying between star systems was an everyday occurrence.

"They have so many kinds, but I don't know what's inside them," Mimi said.

“They’re packaged to be weatherproof, durable, and heatproof,” I told her. “These things aren’t like food you find on grocery store shelves.” The bland packaging was stamped with plain text that listed the contents and how to handle them. Definitely military rations. Was this stuff the same in every universe? “But are these okay to buy as surplus? They’re not out-of-date or rejected due to quality issues, right?”

“This one isn’t past the best-by date,” Elma answered. “They probably just got rid of it because they updated their menu.”

“Updated…their menu?”

“Imperial Fleet ration selections are updated every few years. But the rations themselves don’t expire for fifty years, so they end up with a lot of leftovers when they update the offerings.”

“What an absolute waste.”

“Not at all. The rations are sent out as surplus, and they end up reaching mercenaries like us, traveling merchants, and residents of colonies. Automatic cookers are kind of fancy.”

“Hmm…come to think of it, they might’ve sold rations back on Tarmein Prime.” I’d never paid them much mind, though, since automatic cookers were more convenient and could whip up anything.

“Hmm…there are too many to choose from.” Mimi said, struggling with her decision.

“They don’t really expire, so why don’t we just buy one of each?” I suggested. “Then we can taste-test them all.”

“I’ll pass.”

“Aww. Elma, eat with us!” Mimi protested, but Elma remained steadfast.

“What’s the problem?” I asked her. “Do they taste awful, or something?”

“That’s not it. It’s just…I ate enough of those things for a lifetime before I joined you two.”

“Oh, I get it. You didn’t have an automatic cooker.”

“I had one on the *Swan*, but before then…”

“Figures.”

I let Elma off the hook. Automatic cookers were expensive, after all. Not *super* expensive given a mercenary’s take-home pay, but the cost of a food cartridge versus the cost of a military ration weren’t that much different. Plenty of people might pick the rations instead—so many times that they started to hate them, in Elma’s case.

“Mimi, let’s not force her. I’ll be glad to eat with you.”

“That’s a shame. Oh, should we get some for Tina and Wiska?”

“Let’s just get some for ourselves. If we like them, we can buy a ton.”

“That’s true!”

I didn’t mind splurging on one of every kind, but multiples would be too many. If they were gross, they’d just end up gathering dust in our cargo bay.

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“And there you have it: a full set of all forty-eight Grakkan Empire combat rations.” I spread out the packs of rations atop the big table in the *Black Lotus*’s dining hall.

“Hooray!” Mimi applauded.

“Think ya can eat all this?”

“I don’t think so… One pack is a pretty big portion.”

Tina and Wiska had gathered at the table, too. They’d never tried military rations before, so they were fascinated. *Y’know, when Wiska holds a pack of rations it makes the pack look seriously huge.*

“There’s no way we’re eating all this today,” I agreed. “I’d say one pack per person is our limit, so four packs.”

“They do contain quite a lot of calories…”

“’Cause they’re made for soldiers fighting in combat armor and power armor. They need the energy.”

“I say we just open them and see how it goes. They’re numbered, so why don’t we start with number one?”

“Okay, but one at a time.” Mimi opened a plain brown package and retrieved a few retort pouches from within.

Two of them were about the size of my palm, and one was a rectangular pack of…something. There were also two shaped like sticks. One of the palm-sized ones appeared to be some kind of paste. I guess you were meant to cut off one end of it and squeeze it out.

“These must be crackers here. What’s that?”

“This one seems to be chili bean sauce.”

“Mine says ‘packed pizza.’”

“Both of these say ‘sausage.’”

The squeezable pouch was chili bean sauce, the other palm-sized one was pizza, the rectangular one was a pack of crackers, and the stick-shaped ones were sausages.

“Ready to open them?” I asked.

“Ready,” Mimi answered.

We tore open the packaging at the same time. I was on cracker duty.

“Yep, just regular crackers.” Crunchy and salty, not too powdery. Would it be wrong to call the flavor…inoffensive? They were crackers. ’Nough said.

Mimi sniffed. “Mm… That does smell good.”

Tina munched on her pizza. “Not bad. Shame it’s cold, though.”

“Salty…” Wiska groaned when she ate her sausage. These dwarven twins feared nothing.

“Mimi, hand me those chili beans.”

“Okay. I’ll take a cracker, too.”

“Man, these *are* salty,” Tina said, taking a bite of sausage.

“Oh, the pizza *is* good!”

Mimi and I squeezed chili bean sauce on the crackers and ate them. *Yeah, it's not bad, at least.* There was some kind of meat flavor in the beans, though I didn't know what it was. It had a thick texture and salty sweetness.

"Give me some of that, too," I said to Tina.

"'Kay! Say *ahh*."

"Mm… Ooh, not bad."

"Right?"

The pizza tasted like cheap convenience store stuff, but its cheapness somehow enhanced the experience. It had an onion-like vegetable crunch that made it even better. And this apparently could last fifty years—how the heck did they preserve stuff like this? I mean, these must've come from food cartridges, right?

"It's salty."

"Isn't it?"

So far, every single person who had tried the sausage had called it salty. Anyway, once we had tried all four packs of rations, we shared our opinions.

"They're not bad," I decided. "Edible, if nothing else."

"Altogether, they have rich flavors. I think they're surprisingly good," Mimi agreed.

"Seems like a bunch of 'em could work as a side with liquor," Tina mused.

"Eating a lot of these would probably be bad for you…" Wiska added.

They'd put crackers and sausage in all the rations, though the flavors had varied slightly. By the way, we'd forced two sausages upon Elma, who had been drinking while we ate.

"This isn't bad with alcohol, actually," she said, confirming Tina's theory.

"Elmaaa! Gimme some liquooor!"

"Yeah, yeah. I've got a glass for you already."

“Thank you!”

The drunkards among us began eating the rations as a bar snack with their alcohol. Meanwhile, we took on the items that the drunkards had neglected.

“Ooh, this dessert is really good!” Mimi piped up.

“Not bad, that’s for sure,” I agreed.

Two of the four we’d opened had dessert in them. The first and fourth rations were like breakfast, while the second and third—lunch and dinner—also contained a dessert.

“The second came with tea and coffee, too.”

“Is the Grakkan Empire more of a tea culture? You drink it a lot, right, Mimi?”

“Yes. We drink it most often after lunch.”

Mimi prepared her tea and I prepared my coffee. Then we set upon our desserts.

I’d already taken a bite earlier, but the lunch ration’s dessert was a slightly firm cheesecake. It had a firm texture, but it melted in your mouth once you started chewing. Its citrusy flavor went well with coffee. Mimi seemed satisfied, too.

“Dinner’s dessert is…fruit jelly?” I raised an eyebrow.

“Looks like it.”

That pouch was the same kind as the one that had contained the chili bean sauce. You were supposed to cut off the top and squeeze the contents onto your plate.

“It doesn’t look very appetizing, does it?”

“Now, now. Let’s try it first.” Mimi grinned and scooped up a spoonful of the jelly. “This is like the nutrition supplement jelly they sell at supermarkets. I’ve eaten it before.”

“Oh? Wow, it’s actually not bad.”

It tasted a lot like the supplements they sold in Japan. You know, the ones they advertise with overblown claims like, “Recharge in just ten seconds!” It came in another inoffensive flavor, similar to muscat grape.

“So… Just forty-four meals left, huh?”

“I think it’s fun! I’ve always wondered what soldiers eat.”

“I doubt they eat these all the time. Just in situations where they can’t eat normal food—that is, stuff made with automatic cookers.”

“What kinds of situations would those be?” Mimi asked.

“Hmm…like on the front lines, right? When you’re fighting on land for control of a planet, or something.”

Given the technological advancement of this universe, you wouldn’t bother sending infantry onto planets to destroy enemy facilities. Once you’ve secured astronautical superiority, you could just use orbital bombardment to take them out without breaking a sweat. Alternatively, you could even bombard them directly with asteroids from asteroid belts.

But if you wanted to exert ultimate control over them, that was different. Enemy soldiers could hide in and attack from any building that you didn’t destroy through orbital bombardment. To deal with *that*, you’d need boots on the ground. In the end, you always need soldiers, no matter how advanced your technology is.

“I see. So that’s where you would eat these.”

“Maybe we should keep some in our ship for emergencies. Never know when something might leave us unable to use the automatic cooker.”

“Agreed. We should look for good ones next time we get the chance.”

“I don’t mind these, but we could use something a little lighter.” Imperial Fleet combat rations weren’t bad, but I’d prefer less bulky, more efficient items. Like energy bars, or something.

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We enjoyed a good night’s sleep after our ration sampling party.

Mimi and I left Elma, who had been taken down by a killer hangover, and went out into the Izulux System outpost again. Mei was stuck minding the *Black Lotus*. There were mercenary and Imperial Fleet ships in the hangar for Tina and Wiska to maintain, so Mei served as their bodyguard.

Soldiers were one thing, but you never knew what kind of person a merc might be, and I didn't want them messing with the dwarves.

What I hadn't expected was for them to mess with *me*.

"Look at you, hotshot, surrounded by ladies first thing in the morning!"

"Actin' all smug, you playboy! You're a disgrace to all mercs!"

We had come to a mercenary guild office on the Izulux System outpost. I hadn't made it over to the office yet, so we'd decided to pop in before our date…resulting in this.

I rubbed my temples to soothe my now-aching head and asked, "Umm…so? What do you want?"

I didn't care about them accosting me *that* much. It was true that I'd stood out way too much since my sudden arrival here two weeks ago. I'd had Mei by my side when I accepted the Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge, and just yesterday I'd walked around with Mimi and Elma on my arms, so of course I stood out. Still, it was annoying as hell that people were constantly picking fights with me.

"Don't you 'so' me, pal! What're you smiling about?!"

"Pipe down—you're embarrassing yourself. Again, what do you want?" I stepped in front of Mimi to shield from his yelling. I could tell she was getting scared. I guess I would hear this rando merc out.

"You've been walkin' around here flaunting your women for too long… I ain't havin' it!"

"Newbies oughta act like newbies and toe the line! God, you're gonna make me cry!"

Mercenary A (name pending) wrung his hands as if he really was about to cry, and Mercenary B (name pending) looked up to the ceiling and stamped his feet. What was with these guys? Were they doing some kind of comedy routine?

"Say something, dammit!"

"Who do you think you are?!"

I sighed. “Look, what do you want me to say here? Basically, you’re not happy with me. That’s it, right? So what do you want me to do about it? If you’re asking me to give you Mimi for a night or something, I’ll kill you right now.”

I threw out a light jab at the air. The men looked at each other, then back to me, then waved their hands in frantic denial.

“No, that’s not it!” Mercenary A protested.

“Women aren’t objects! We’d never say something like that!” Mercenary B added. He sounded surprisingly respectful.

“Wait, now you’re serious all the sudden? Okay, again: What do you want from me?”

“You keep on flirting and flirting and flirting like a show-off!”

“I bet you’re takin’ turns with them every night, right?! I won’t have it!”

“Well, er… I don’t care if you say that to me, but isn’t that sexual harassment if you’re saying it in front of Mimi?”

“M-Master Hiro…” Mimi tugged on my sleeve from behind. She seemed mortified.

“*M-M-Master Hiro*…?” Mercenary A’s voice quivered.

“Y-you little… You’re making that poor, innocent girl call you ‘master’?!” Mercenary B shouted.

“No. I mean, you’re not entirely wrong, but no. I’m not forcing her to do anything, okay?”

I wish Mimi’s presence would stop dealing social damage to me. I mean, I know it looks *bad to have a barely adult woman calling me “Master.” That’s so true. We’ve been like that since I met her, so I never thought much of it, but yeah. It’s true.*

“That’s right. I call Master Hiro that of my own volition.”

“Hey, Mimi? Mind zipping your lips for a sec?” I turned around to face Mimi and smiled as I held her face with both hands, pinching and kneading her cheeks. I couldn’t take much more social damage.

“I knew it! We can’t leave an innocent young lady in a womanizing bastard’s grasp!”

“I challenge you! You’re gonna release that poor girl!”

Mercenary A (name still pending) and Mercenary B (name still pending) screamed and pointed at me. *Didn’t your mothers ever teach you guys that pointing is rude?*

“I don’t mind whatever ‘challenge’ you’re thinking of, but…”

“Even if Master Hiro lost, I would never leave his side.”

“Damn yooou!”

“Just explooode!”

They cursed me, bodies crumpled in despair. While I scratched my head in confusion, a third man appeared behind me.

“I heard the whole thing! Allow me to be the referee of your duel!”

“Who the hell—Captain Broadwell?!”

The intruder was none other than Captain Broadwell. *Why are you posing like that? What are you, a JoJo’s character?*

“Uh…duel?” I repeated, confused.

“Indeed. It is common for mercenaries and nobles to duel with something they value on the line. Might I be so presumptuous as to act as referee?”

“Uh, well, there’s not really anything to put on the line?” I wasn’t forcing Mimi to be on my ship, and she didn’t feel that way, either…I hoped. She was with me of her own free will, as evidenced by everything she’d ever said or done, up to and including her remark just now.

“Forget the details. These fellows here are just envious of your popularity, Sir Hiro. They’re looking for an excuse to bloody your nose.”

“Harsh!”

“Also,” Captain Broadwell added, “on a personal level, I just want to see the *Krishna* flying and fighting in real time.”

“True to your desires, huh?”

“A man needs occasional entertainment that both indulges his hobbies and furthers his education.”

“Education?” Mimi cocked her head and Captain Broadwell shrugged.

As Broadwell gazed into her eyes he suddenly turned pale. “E-erm… Excuse me, Miss…Mimi? Perhaps I’m mistaken, but have we met before?”

“Um…? We had dinner together just the other day, didn’t we?”

“Oh, no, not that. Erm, in the capital, for example…”

“I’ve never been to the capital. I’ve lived all my life on the colony I was born on, Tarmein Prime.”

“Ah, I-I see. Ha ha ha… A chance resemblance, I’m sure.” Captain Broadwell placed a hand on his chest. For some reason he was sweating bullets. *What is his deal? Does Mimi look like the daughter of some bigwig, or something?*

“By the way, what did you mean by *education*?” she asked again.

“O-oh, of course. How rude of me. Well, Miss Mimi, fights between small ships are a truly inspirational sight. Observing mercenaries who have mastered the art of fighting pirates, especially, is extremely educational for us military folk.”

“I see… Excuse me, Captain Broadwell? I’m just a civilian, so there’s no need to called me ‘Miss.’”

“Ha ha, I would never be so disrespectful toward Sir Hiro’s wife.”

“Wife? Well, I…” Mimi brought her hands up to her flushed cheeks and squirmed cutely.

Yeah, you’re adorable, but Captain Broadwell’s being really suspicious. I felt like there was an ultra-large land mine just waiting to be stepped on…but not right at this moment. Perhaps avoiding the capital would be a good idea for now.

“So, uh, are we doing this?” I asked.

“Hell yeah we are!”

“Let’s see what you have to say after we crush you!”

Mercenary A and Mercenary B had recovered and started getting rowdy again. *If you really want to, fine, I guess we can do this.*

As for the duel, I'll omit the details beyond saying that it was a one-sided trouncing and they left crying. It wasn't a 1v1, or even a 2v1; in the end, I'd overwhelmed them even in a 5v1, at which point Captain Broadwell complained, "This isn't very educational at all."

Don't blame me! Blame those crappy mercs.

***

After the duel, two days passed without much happening. I checked in on the mechanic twins, whose eyes were growing deader by the day, and spent some peaceful hours aboard the *Krishna* messing around with Mimi and Elma.

But now I was staring at Lieutenant Commander Serena's amused grin on the cockpit's main monitor. "You seem to be on quite the warpath," she said.

She'd called early in the morning, so I'd slipped out of bed to avoid waking Mimi and Elma and taken her call in the cockpit.

"I'm not the one who started it. They came at me first, so I meted out some much-needed discipline."

The duel had been held with the permission of the Imperial Fleet—specifically, Captain Broadwell—so mercenaries and soldiers alike had watched eagerly.

There wasn't much entertainment at the outpost, so the soldiers all leapt at the chance to watch in a duel between mercenaries using real ships. Though they probably wondered if the fight was fixed given how thoroughly I'd beaten them.

They'd even sent Imperial Fleet corvettes and carriers at me, but I flattened every last one. *Keep up the training, fellas*.

"So? What are you calling me for?"

“How cold. Do I *need* a reason to call you?”

“No, but I’m not interested in a drinking party. Looking after you is too much trouble.”

“Grr…very well. Do you happen to recognize this?” Her grin now stiff with irritation, Serena sent a video file.

I checked to ensure that she didn’t hide any weird data in it, then opened the file. At once, I saw a dazzling pulsar, a huge swarm of crystal life-forms, and an enormous crystal that looked like a chestnut inside its burr.

“Ooh, yeah. That’s a heck of a Mother Crystal,” I mused.

“…So you know what this is?”

Crap! I wanted to punch myself for being so careless. “Nah, it just looks like a big mommy, y’know?”

“I recall you mentioned pulsar systems before.”

I whistled to myself nonchalantly.

“Enough of that racket, please. Tell me everything you know. That is an order,” the lieutenant demanded, glowering at me so ferociously that I almost wet myself.

“Eep…I’ve said this before, but my memories are kinda fuzzy, y’know?”

“But you know about the crystal life-forms, don’t you? Tell the truth. Now. I promise I will conceal my informant and call it an unsourced rumor.”

I thought quietly to myself for a moment. Honestly, I didn’t want the Imperial Fleet, let alone Serena herself, to see me as an enigma full of useful information. Maybe it was already too late—but I wanted to keep the damage to a minimum.

Fortunately, whether she would keep her word or not, she'd promised not to share her source of information. She knew that my *Krishna* and *Black Lotus* could cause some real trouble in the empire, so rather than pointlessly earning my wrath, she would surely think it better to maintain our current relationship.

But first, I gave her a warning. "If you lay one finger on my crew or try to force me into anything, I'll make your life hell. And I'll use any means necessary to escape the empire."

"Is that a threat?"

"I just want to protect me and mine. And that's not all. If you trifle with me, my video folder will go viral. Imagine every site with the same top video: Dumb Marquess's Daughter Serena's Cute Video Montage."

"Okay, yes, understood. I will not reveal my source, and if anyone tries to discover it, I will protect you as best I can. Delete the video, please."

"How about I promise I won't use it in future negotiations." Not that I would delete it, though. There was no way to prove that. Besides, I wasn't about to give up my means of revenge that easily.

"Tch…very well. I accept your terms. Now tell me everything."

"Deal."

I told her as much as I knew about the Mother Crystal inhabiting the pulsar system. Mother Crystals alone had no movement capabilities, and their only means of attack was emitting limitless small crystal life-forms. The small crystals they created could shoot laser beams equivalent to Class-I laser weapons, or they could attack by ramming. They didn't have defenses equivalent to shield technology, so artillery and explosive weapons were more effective on them than lasers were. Of course, even though they were weaker, lasers still did plenty of damage.

More annoying was the Guardian Crystal swarm that protected the Mother Crystal. This swarm was composed of stronger versions of medium crystals, and a lot of them. They excelled at close-range shooting, and they would ram you without hesitation, so they were a real pain.

But since the Guardian Crystals had a short range, you could cull their numbers from outside it if you had long-range weapons yourself. They

had a high maximum speed, but they couldn't make sharp turns. And they tended to prioritize enemies that were close to the Mother Crystal, so fast small craft could drag them around while large and medium craft easily sniped them from afar.

If possible, you wanted to enter the star system through a hyperlane exit as far from the Mother Crystal as possible. That way, you could prevent your small ships from having to fight both the small crystals she emitted and her Guardian Crystals at the same time.

I hadn't touched on this yet, but for some reason, large crystals weren't often found in the same star system as the Mother Crystal. Maybe they were meant to be the next generation of Mother Crystals that had left the nest for good.

"Also, the Mother Crystal herself is pretty tough. The only chance small craft have of damaging it is with anti-ship reactive torpedoes. Medium and large ships should use artillery or reactive missiles. Lasers aren't totally useless, but the other weapon types will get you more bang for your buck. Also, the Mother Crystal's weakness is the glowing bit in the center. You can probably see it already, but…"

I marked the center of the Mother Crystal onscreen.

"These spikes here are a problem. When a projectile approaches the Mother Crystal, the crystal creates a spike there to stop it with pinpoint accuracy. It basically uses them like moving armor that reaches out from its center to the tip of the spike. She can hold out for a long time against attacks from just one angle. The best way to deal with this is, once you've finished off the Guardian Crystals, have your heaviest-hitting large and medium ships surround the Mother from all sides and fire on her weak point."

"You know quite a lot," Serena said, impressed.

"I've got experience fighting them. Don't ask when or where, and don't assume my information is infallible. It's possible that this Mother Crystal won't be like the ones I know, and her Guardian Crystals might not be the same either."

I couldn't guarantee that the knowledge I'd cultivated in *Stella Online* would apply to crystal life-forms in this universe. But judging by my

experiences until now, though, it couldn't be far off. I'd encountered a lot of things that had been omitted in *Stella Online*, but almost nothing I'd seen actively clashed with anything that had been in-game.

"What is your own assessment of the accuracy of your information?"

"Maybe I should say fifty-fifty, but to be honest, I'm about ninety percent sure. If they weren't the same as my memories, I'd have ended up as crystal food on my second raid."

I'd kept a margin of safety, but my game of tag with the crystals was in effect not so different from *SOL*. Their attack strength, angles, and speed fit my muscle memory perfectly. Their durability also seemed much the same—so I figured the Mother Crystal would probably be the same too.

"I see… Thank you for this vital information. It's all so specific that not sure how I'm going to relay it all."

"Whatever you do, keep me a secret. For both our sakes."

"Indeed. For both our sakes."

"Also, you should think about the value of this information," I said. "This is a big favor, and I doubt you plan to welch on a debt, right?"

"Ugh…I know. I will do what I can to accommodate you. Though it would be helpful to have some guidance regarding your needs…?"

"Hmm…in that case…"

I told Serena about how I was planning to install top-of-the-line fighting bots in the *Black Lotus*. She was a high-ranking member of the military and nobility to boot, so I wondered if she had any useful connections.

"I see. It's an understandable concern. Your ship doesn't have any imperial soldiers wearing power armor, after all. Very well; there should be a corporation handling combat robots among the munitions industries funded by the Holz family. I will write you a letter of introduction."

"I'd be grateful if you greased the wheels for us." You couldn't be too careful around Serena when she was sober, but I appreciated how she always paid me back. Even if she was annoying as hell when she was drunk. "So is the fleet planning to go out again?"

“I believe so, yes. We have actionable information, thanks to you. The rest relies on my efforts.”

“It’ll be tough with the forces we had last time,” I warned.

We might’ve had a chance if we’d combined all the recon units into one force, but now that two of the four had taken major losses, it would be difficult even with every single ship in the remaining units.

“We are aware of that,” Serena assured me. “Through their noble sacrifice, the Third and Fourth Reconnaissance Units have brought us vital information about the enemy’s forces. We plan to send the full force standing by in the outpost to secure certain victory.”

“Ah. Then I think we’ll do all right.”

If we were going to bring the main force from the outpost, then we’d have plenty firepower. As long as we didn’t do anything stupid, victory was within our grasp.

“Behind-the-scenes negotiations and formation should take a few days, so use that time to make sure you’re in peak condition.”

“Aye aye.” I saluted. After flashing a last smile, Serena hung up.

Well, I’d better fill Mimi and Elma in. After I wake them up and we shower, anyway.

***

Two days after Serena’s call, it was decided that the Imperial Fleet garrison at the Izulux System outpost would attack the crystal life-forms again. Mercenaries contracted as part of the strategy were notified that we would resume operations in twenty-four hours. Many responded with “Finally!” It seemed everyone welcomed some action to break up the monotony life stuck on the outpost.

Surprisingly, no mercenaries had nullified their contract and fled. I’d expected some to run away to fight another day, but they had defied my expectations.

“Turning tail in these circumstances would be a huge black mark on your record,” Elma said. “If people say you took the money only to run away like a coward, then you might as well just stay home and prioritize your own safety. And if we look like we have a solid chance of winning, well, I’m sure plenty of mercs would love to be in our shoes.”

“Hmm…guess we’ll end up standing out again.”

“Excuse me?” The look on her face clearly said, *What the heck are you thinking?*

“If other mercenaries don’t take the lead, then we’ll stand out for being the only ones who do. That’s just inevitable.”

I had no intention of cowering in the back like the others, so that would be the natural result. In any case, we would need a fast small ship to go out front and bait the Guardian Crystals, or else we might lose some of our medium and large ships. That would reduce our chance of victory, possibly leading to the loss of our small ships either way.

“Sorry, girls, but I plan to go out there and fight.”

“We’ll be okay. I have faith in you, Master Hiro,” Mimi said.

“I’ll trust in any decision you make. You’re not the kind of guy to choose a pointless death.”

“But of course.” I wasn’t into dying on purpose; reckless charges and self-sacrifice could eat shit. I was here to do my job as long as I could keep my life.

In crystal life-form raid battles, the role of the fast small ship was basically that of a dodge-tank. You incite hostility, draw enemy attacks, and keep the crystals away from the medium and large ships that supplied firepower. It was dangerous, but I was used to that. You just took care not to get surrounded and crushed, fired basically at random, and ran away as fast as your little legs could carry you.

If you had enough speed and maneuverability, you could even do it with a peashooter. In a way, it was more of a beginner raid in *SOL*. Though of course, real beginners would fly into bad spots and die all over the place.

“The *Black Lotus*’s dock is finally open again. How about we head back?” I suggested.

“Sure,” Elma agreed. “We’ll need some maintenance before we launch again, anyway.”

“Are Tina and Wiska doing okay? I’m a little worried,” Mimi said.

“They have been working pretty much nonstop…”

We piloted the *Krishna* out from the Izulux System outpost’s small ship hangar and parked on the *Black Lotus*.

“Welcome back.”

“Welcome back…”

Tina and Wiska welcomed us when we arrived…but they were in an awful state.

“H-hey. Good to be back…” I greeted them back. “Have you two slept at all?”

“Yeah, we got a few winks. When we could leave the work to the maintenance bots, anyway.”

“There were a few hours when our hands were free.”

They grinned weakly, but I could see the deep bags under their eyes. They didn’t look like they’d slept much at all. Their faces and uniforms were covered with oil and other gunk, too.

“This is no good. Girls, we’re gonna get them bathed and in bed. Help me out.”

“Okay!”

“Roger that.”

I picked up a twin in either arm and strode toward the residential area of the ship with Mimi and Elma following behind.

“What the heck? Hon, don’t we have to maintain the *Krishna*?” Tina protested.

“That can wait. We’ve got twenty-four hours until we leave, and it’ll take thirty-six more to arrive. We’ll be fine.”

“U-umm,” ventured Wiska, “we haven’t showered for a while, so don’t lift us—eep!”

I silenced the dead-eyed Tina, who was still trying to work, and tightened my grip on the struggling Wiska. These girls needed to settle down.

If Wiska was worried about them stinking, well, I didn’t really smell anything but oil, anyway. *Maybe* I’d smell something if I unzipped their jumpsuits, buried my face in, and took a huge whiff…but I would never do anything that ridiculously perverted. I *wouldn’t*, okay?!

When I reached the bathroom, I threw the twins inside and ordered Mimi and Elma to scrub them down and put them to bed. Then I went to the bridge.

“Welcome home, Master.”

“Hey, I’m—whoa!”

As soon as I stepped onto the bridge, Mei ran toward me at incredible speed and hugged me. Her silky skin and soft chest were pure bliss. She held me loosely, but I couldn’t move even if I struggled. How did that work?

“Mei?”

“Just a little longer.”

“O-okay.” I let her have her way with me—and more importantly, I hugged her back. She’d said “just a little longer,” but Mei didn’t release me until a full five minutes had passed.

“That was wonderful,” she said as she finally let go.

“I’m glad you’re happy, but what’s gotten into you?”

“Did I do something unnatural?” Mei cocked her head and looked at me sincerely, as if she meant to actually uncertain here the problem lay.

“Well, er, I was just surprised by the sudden physical affection.”

“To put it bluntly, Master, I was lonely.”

Mei was an android, but as machine intelligence, she had thoughts and feelings. Having to part with her master for so long would lead to loneliness and stress. To counteract that, she needed physical affection from me. Makes…sense?

“I get it. I won’t let this happen again.”

“Thank you.”

***

“…What are you doing?” Elma asked when she found us.

“Mei’s reporting everything that happened while we were out.”

“You mean…like that?” Mimi asked as well.

“Got a problem with it?”

I’d found myself on the lounge couch with my head in Mei’s lap. She stroked my hair as she reported everything from the past six days. Elma and Mimi had finished bathing the twins and bundled them off to bed, and now they walked in on this scene. They looked incredibly shocked. But look—it’s a captain’s duty to care for his crew’s mental health, right? This totally counted.

“Just ignore whatever problems you have with it for now. You might not believe it, but this was a *compromise* on her part.”

“I understand. Well, I actually don’t, but okay.” Mimi shrugged.

“Well, I don’t really care…” Elma shook her head.

Mimi sat next to Mei and Elma a little way off. Once they were settled, Mei continued. “In these past six days, there has been no particular trouble. The mercenaries staying here were amazed by the welcoming interior, and they had many questions regarding the details of the furnishings and where they were purchased. Some had poor manners, but I believe, after my sincere persuasion, they have been reformed.”

“Sincere persuasion…?”

“Yes.”

Mimi and Elma looked pale, so I guess I wasn’t the only one thinking this so-called *persuasion* involved physical violence. I just prayed that the affected mercenaries wouldn’t be terrified at the sight of any maids they happened to see from now on.

For the rest of the day, Mei accompanied me around the clock. And I do mean the *whole* day here, so…figure it out.

***

I woke up in my bedroom aboard the *Black Lotus* about four hours before it was time to begin the mission. Mei wasn’t here, so she was probably on the bridge or in the dining hall already. It seemed she’d been cured of her loneliness-induced stress, but I really had to try not to be away for days on end again. Seriously.

I couldn’t keep up with someone who didn’t feel fatigue…

“Are you gonna be all right?” Elma asked in the dining hall, staring at me in exasperation. “It’s almost time for the mission, y’know.”

“I’m fine. After a nice, leisurely breakfast, I’m sure I can manage.” I scarfed down a fake hot dog and drank some kind of green nutritional smoothie. This would be kind of a dystopian meal if the hot dog was, like, a nutritional paste or something. “How are Tina and Wiska?”

“They woke up hours ago and went to work on the *Krishna*. They’ve got plenty of energy now. Mimi went to the hangar to do some final checks on our supplies.”

“That so? When I finish eating, I guess I’ll go check on them.”

“You do that. They really pushed themselves to the breaking point. Yesterday was rough. It took both me and Mimi to get them bathed, since they pretty much passed out right when they got in the bath.”

“Whoa that’s dangerous! Thanks for taking care of them.”

I imagined Mimi and Elma manipulating the dwarves’ sleepy bodies in the bath. Part of me wanted to see it. Apparently guessing what I was thinking, Elma pinched my thigh in irritation. *Ow, that really hurts!*

“You don’t know how to be serious, do you?” she sighed. “We’re about to plunge right into the jaws of death.”

“That’s not the way I see it.”

The Imperial Fleet was pretty big; I didn’t see us losing in a million years. We had a huge force for this fight: six battleships, twenty cruisers, twenty-five destroyers, and forty-two corvettes. Honestly, did they even need mercenaries?

It was clear from the way they’d allocated these vessels that the Imperial Fleet was serious. It seemed that, by throwing overwhelming force at the problem, they were hoping to avoid the loss of even a single ship. This fleet had about 1.5 times the strength of all four units from the first trip combined. Now that the enemy’s position was clear, they had focused their forces instead of dividing them.

Basic math showed that we were going in with about three times the strength of the badly wounded third and fourth units. And they were sending mercenaries, too. To my *SOL*-cultivated senses, this seemed like almost too much firepower. The combined recon force alone should’ve been able to do the job as long as they didn’t make any mistakes.

“And that’s about the size of it,” I finished, having explained all that to Elma.

“I see. And do you have anything to actually back all this up?”

“That I do. I can’t say for certain since we’re facing *a lot* of enemies, but once the Guardian Crystals are cleaned up, I imagine the battleship, cruisers, and destroyers should overwhelm the Mother Crystal instantly.”

In other words, we mercenaries and the Imperial Fleet corvettes just had to successfully take down some Guardian Crystals. Once we had drawn their attention, we could just zip around and let the Imperial Fleet’s firepower handle the rest. We’d play a quick game of tag with the Mother Crystal’s littlest children, and then it would all go kaboom.

“As long as we don’t encounter anything unexpected, the battle should be decided before the Imperial Fleet’s fired a single shot.”

Even the big losses from last week didn’t necessarily count as a failed mission. We’d taken major damage, but we’d accomplished our objective of learning the enemy’s location and numbers. And since most of the recon units had returned home, that was considered a success.

“So don’t freak out, but don’t let your guard down. Same as usual, right?” Elma grinned.

“Exactly.”

Less than four hours remained until the start of our mission.

***

We were off. The Imperial Fleet’s huge force moved out, and we mercenaries followed.

We couldn’t risk wandering off course, so each mercenary attached themselves to a designated ship using sync mode. It was like the cruise control version of auto-docking. We accepted a request from them, then handed over the ship’s controls temporarily. We would automatically act in perfect sync with them while we were connected. But it wasn’t like you were shackled to the controlling ship; if there was an emergency, we could break off and act freely at a moment’s notice.

“Well this is boring,” I groaned.

“Umm…yes it is,” Mimi agreed. “Should we play a game or something?”

Elma glared at us.

“You two…”

The *Krishna* was currently docked inside the *Black Lotus* as we followed the fleet. Normally, we would stand by in the *Krishna*’s cockpit in case of emergency, but we were looking at thirty-six hours to reach the Hierom System where the Mother Crystal was. There was no point in sitting all tense in the cockpit that long, and the Imperial Fleet had corvettes up front anyway. We mercs had plenty of time to react if needed.

So here we were, just sitting around in transit. The fact that Mimi agreed that this was boring actually showed how much she’d grown. When she’d first come aboard, she always froze up when we went to kill pirates. Now, when I said I was bored, she suggested a game. I couldn’t help but notice that her chest was growing, too.

About that, by the way… Her body was definitely still growing. As someone close to her, I only had low-IQ thoughts such as “Whoa, big booba!” But the medical pod’s daily measurements were showing real growth. Mimi truly was a terrifying girl!

“Ow!”

“Hmph.”

While Mimi picked a game to play, my eyes were glued to her chest, prompting Elma to pinch my thigh again. To be fair, I was being pretty rude. I should do better.

Instead, I turned to stare at Elma. Fair white skin, pointed ears, perfect features… Yeah, she was beautiful. Mimi was on the cuter side, but Elma was firmly a mature beauty. You might say Mimi was like a puppy and Elma was like a flower.

Yeah, a flower is a good metaphor.

“What?” she demanded.

“Nothing. I was just thinking you’re as lovely as a flower.”

“What in the world?” Elma glared at me, but her ears turned red and stood straight up. Those ears of hers said more than her mouth at times. I could see why space elves hid their ears when they were embarrassed.

While I sat between Mimi and Elma, flirting away, we heard lively voices from the hallway leading to the hangar. It seemed Tina and Wiska had finished their work on the *Krishna* and were on their way here to lounge around.

“Good work,” I said to them in greeting.

“You can say that again. Ship’s good to go.”

“Though we only did simple checks and maintenance.”

The duel had been held with output greatly lowered, low-intensity lasers, and mock ammunition, so there hadn’t been any real damage to the plating. Only the maneuvers had been the real thing, so the *Krishna* had only taken the usual wear to parts related to movement and turning.

“Okay, c’mere.” I opened my arms wide, still sitting on the sofa. Tina lunged at me.

“Yahoo!”

I caught her in my arms and ruffled her hair all over. “Theeere, there there there there.”

“Ah ha ha ha! You’re messing up my hair!” she complained, but she allowed me to muss up her hair for a while longer before I finally released her. When I did, two more silky heads pressed themselves against my chest.

So I ruffled Mimi and Elma’s hair, too.

“Theeere, there there there.”

“Hee hee hee!”

“Hey, a little softer.”

Wiska watched us, speechless. Once I had satisfied Mimi and Elma, I turned to Wiska and opened my arms again.

“Get in there!”

“S-Sis—whoa!”

Tina shoved Wiska from behind, and she tripped and fell onto my chest. I caught her without missing a beat.

“Theeere, there there there. I know Tina drags you into stuff all the time.”

“Hey! That ain’t true,” Tina protested.

“What about right now?” I pointed at Wiska, who now had her head buried in my chest—thanks to Tina.

“Ngh!”

Tina pressed her lips together with a frustrated look. I watched, satisfied, and continued tousling the motionless Wiska’s hair until Mei entered the break room.

I picked Wiska up and sat her next to Mimi. Mei knelt down and leaned her head into my stomach.

“Theeere, there there there.”

She’d probably been watching us from the bridge and wanted to get in on the hair-ruffling action. I didn’t mind—I’d give them as much as they wanted.

Chapter 9:
The Crystal War

OUR PEACEFUL HOURS together couldn't last forever, though. The fleet sailed on unhindered until it entered the hyperlane to the Hierom System, where we would do battle. Soon we would plunge into the star system from hyperspace.

"All right, begin all checks. Mei, charge up the catapult so we can launch the moment we enter the system."

"Okay!"

"Aye aye."

"Understood, Master."

I gave orders to my crew and tapped a few buttons on my console to shift the generators from idling to cruising mode. The entrance to the Hierom System should be far from the Mother Crystal, but it wasn't outside the realm of possibility that Guardian Crystals might be placed near us.

Whether out of instinct, habit, intelligence, or experience, who could say, but the Guardians often camped near hyperlane exits. In *Stella Online*, the closest hyperlane exit to the Mother Crystal also had the thickest concentration of enemies. Would it be the same in this universe?

If crystal life-forms acted the same here as they did in *SOL*, the area near this far-off exit should be comparatively unguarded, but…

Well, we wouldn't know until we charged in.

"We are now approaching the Hierom System. Thirty seconds to entry!" Mimi announced.

"All right, let's do this thing." I gripped the control lever, raised the generator output to battle mode, and focused my mind.

I was reviewing my strategy for dealing with the crystals: effective evasive maneuvers against their attacks, how to lead them about, and the rest.

First, we needed to take out the Guardian Crystals that would attack our rearguard. Then, draw as much hostile attention from as many Guardian Crystals as we could before leading them around like an enemy parade. That was my task.

In this situation, my job was not to destroy the enemy—it was to make it easier for our allies with the most firepower to fight.

"Returning to normal space soon. Counting down… Five, four, three, two, one, zero!"

There was an odd noise as we exited the hyperlane, different than what you'd hear entering or exiting faster-than-light drive. It was like a *gyooom* or a *byooon*… Kind of like if had a synthesizer to make the craziest sounds possible. What was that noise, anyway?

As I wondered, the *Black Lotus*—with the *Krishna* inside ready to launch—returned to normal space. The moment we did, alarms blared in the ship.

"Presence of crystal life-forms confirmed," Mei informed us. "Imperial Fleet frontline corvettes are entering battle. All mercenaries have been ordered to strike."

"Understood. Get me out there."

"Yes. Everyone, good luck in battle." Mei bowed on the bridge monitor and sent us on our way.

In the next instant, we were pressed back into our seats. The hangar catapult ejected the *Krishna* into normal space, creating g-forces that were too much for the inertia control system to suppress.

"Urgh…I'll never get used to this," Mimi groaned.

"Inertial control devices don't work well on acceleration from external sources," I replied. "Mimi, use the data from the fleet and mark the Guardians' positions."

"Okay!"

I turned the ship around and zoomed toward the line of battle. The Imperial Fleet corvettes positioned at the van had already engaged the Guardian Crystals, and other mercenary ships were on their way up to the front.

It seemed removing the crystals trying to attack our rearguard would be no problem for them. The best thing for me to do would be to start drawing the attention of the crystal life-forms.

“Ladies, we’re going to make a detour and charge right into their flank. Activate weapons system.”

The bow of the *Krishna* transformed, revealing two large-bore flak cannons. Weapon arms wielding four heavy laser cannons activated, and the weapons bay at the bottom of the ship was set to launch two anti-ship reactive torpedoes at a moment’s notice.

Time to tango.

“Roger,” Elma replied. “Leave the sub-systems to me.”

Like I said, I didn’t take the *Krishna* directly to the front. Instead, I took the scenic route.

“This is the *Krishna*,” I announced to the other ships. “We’ll skirt around the front line and plunge into the enemy’s flank. When we get there, we’ll use anti-ship reactive torpedoes to draw their attention. Don’t get caught in the explosion.”

I tapped my console and shared my planned route, as well as the expected range of the explosion, with all ships. I was fairly certain no one else in this group would plunge into the middle of the enemy formation, but hey, might as well make sure.

“We’re going in,” I told the girls.

“Right!”

“Aye aye, Captain.”

After making sure I was far enough from the rest of the fleet, I accelerated and charged into the enemy flank. One crystal immediately noticed the *Krishna*’s approach and changed course to intercept us, but I flew right by it and fired both flak and heavy lasers. My goal was to draw enemy attention. The wounded crystal’s rage elicited further hostility from its companions, shifting some of their attention away from our front lines and onto the *Krishna*.

“Let’s fire one off and get this party started!”

I launched an anti-ship reactive torpedo from the ship's underside weapons bay, swerving to keep us out of the range of the explosion. Before the first torpedo detonated, I'd already launched a second to another faraway point.

"Okay, one more! Come to Papa! C'mon, c'mon!"

My taunting wouldn't reach the crystals, but the first torpedo clearly had. It hit a Guardian Crystal that had just begun turning toward me, the violent explosion enveloping several crystals around it.

The second torpedo landed right in the guts of the enemy formation and obliterated three Guardian Crystals in one go. The crystal shrapnel from the impact smashed into other Guardian Crystals. Soon a huge swath of them turned toward the *Krishna*, enraged.

"So it begins. Keep an eye on our shield capacity, okay?"

"Aye aye. Leave it to me."

Elma was reliable, as always. I pushed the *Krishna*'s thrusters to maximum power. It was time for an extreme game of tag, complete with firearms and over a hundred "it"s.

***

We warped out of hyperdrive and immediately launched into battle with the crystal life-forms. The enemy's main forces were a variant of medium-sized crystals that we were tentatively calling "Guardian Crystals."

Thanks to Hiro's information, this enemy behavior was as expected, and the fleet showed no signs of surprise. It had been backbreaking work to put together a fleet to eradicate these crystals based on uncertain info from an unknown source—but it now proved to be worthwhile.

I had shared the source of this information with no one. After getting the details from him, I had devised a faux analysis ostensibly based on intelligence gathered by the Third and Fourth Reconnaissance units to win over the other units' captains and the outpost's officers.

I wasn't so foolish as to claim I'd heard a rumor, or that I'd gotten information from a mercenary. Either of those tactics would run the risk of blowing his cover.

"It looks like our initial counterattack will go off without a hitch," I said.

Just as we had strategized, our thick layer of speedy corvettes were now drawing the attention of the Guardian Crystals. Small mercenary ships bolstered the front lines, and other mercenaries with medium and large ships were providing covering fire. Imperial Fleet ships were also preparing to bombard the enemy.

"Indeed. Your analysis was right on target, Lieutenant Commander."

"I suppose it was."

Of course, this was thanks to *his* analysis, not my own. But that effectively changed nothing. If this strategy went off without a hitch, I would be credited for its success.

Suddenly I heard his voice over the open channel comms.

"This is the *Krishna*. We'll skirt around the front line and plunge into the enemy's flank. When we get there, we'll use anti-ship reactive torpedoes to draw their attention. Don't get caught in the explosion." Then he shared the information on his ship's position, route, and where his torpedoes would detonate.

"He never changes."

"More proof that he didn't earn the Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge for nothing."

His ship, the *Krishna*, charged to the enemy swarm's flank and took a savage bite out of it. He did not just dash through the crystals; he attacked as he went.

The speed of his maneuvers was jaw-dropping. He had not slowed at all since he'd begun his charge; proof of his mastery of his ship's controls. What sort of training, what sort of life-or-death situations had birthed such a mercenary?

"Targeting data synchronized!"

“We shall crush them while he draws their attention. Begin synchronized bombardment.”

“Aye aye, ma’am! Beginning synchronized bombardment!”

We unified our data to ensure the fleet’s all-out attacks would not overlap and began a perfectly synchronized bombardment. Our ships fired their lasers as one, lighting up the blackness of outer space.

“Wave one eliminated!”

“Wave two is closing in on the mercenary ship!”

“Bombard based on the data he sends,” I ordered. “He will gather our targets for us. Focus our firepower. Save our reactive missiles for now.”

“Aye aye, ma’am!”

This would settle our preliminary skirmish. The main event was next.

***

We dashed through space teeming with crystal life-forms, weaving through the Guardian Crystals and smashing them with flak from point-blank range. At the same time, we fired heavy lasers at the small ones that tried to slam into us head-on.

Unconcerned with collateral damage their comrades, the Guardian Crystals ruthlessly fired laser beams and balls at the *Krishna*. But my ship’s sturdy shields held.

“Our shields are still stable,” Elma said.

“Their beams aren’t as strong as they look,” I answered. “The balls pack more of a punch, but they’re slow and aren’t too accurate, so they won’t hit you as long as you keep up your speed. The attacks we really need to worry about are their charges.”

“Sure, but we still have our limits. Our shield capacity is gradually being whittled down.”

“How are you two so calm at times like this…” Mimi mumbled.

I couldn't turn to look, since it'd be stupid to take my eyes off the main monitor, but I had a feeling Mimi was white as a sheet from nerves right now. No surprises there—if I made a mistake, we could end up slammed by small crystals or bounced around like a pinball between Guardians.

If that happened, our shields would evaporate in seconds, leaving us vulnerable to more crystal charges. But I wasn't planning to make a mistake.

"The Imperial Fleet is sharing bombardment data! They're about to perform synchronized bombardment!"

Mimi's words were punctuated by the flash of many powerful lasers firing behind the *Krishna*. The light of the high-output laser cannons reflected blindingly off the Guardian Crystals, which began to melt and explode. Imperial battleships and cruisers had some massive power behind their lasers. They were so strong that the crystals' flimsy laser resistance didn't stand a chance.

"Incredible…"

"And that's exactly why you can't fight imperial battleships and cruisers head-on. The strategy there is to stick close to them."

The laser attack had drawn enemy attention to the Imperial Fleet ships. The Guardian Crystals suddenly stopped aiming for the *Krishna* and turned toward this new adversary. This was my chance—I promptly fired both of my remaining reactive torpedoes into the swarm of crystals up ahead, whipping around to plunge into the hole created by the Imperial Fleet's bombardment. Powerful g-forces pulled on us when I turned, but I was used to this by now.

"Nnnghh…our torpedoes have detonated! The crystals are coming for us again!" Mimi struggled to shout.

"Good. Let's show 'em a good time."

"This is getting easy now."

When we turned to run again, the way ahead was nice and clear thanks to the Imperial Fleet's bombardment. It would be easy to drag the

crystals behind us like this since the *Krishna* was so much faster than them. Piece of cake. All I had to do was evade the laser balls coming from behind.

"They're performing another synchronized bombardment," Mimi announced.

Once again, the fleet bombarded the living hell out of the crystals trailing us. Their laser bombardment, calculated for perfect efficiency with no overlap or gaps on coverage, vaporized the remaining crystals. Now all that remained were a few survivors from the bombardment and the other group engaging the Imperial Fleet's corvettes and mercenaries.

"Let's join that brawl and finish them off."

"Okay!"

"Roger that."

Before long, the crystals around us had been completely eradicated.

***

"Good work, guy and gals," Tina greeted us when we returned. "We'll start resupply and maintenance."

"Thanks. I have a hunch the damaged mercenary ships will need to come to us for supplies and maintenance again, so be ready," I called out to the twins as I descended to the ladder.

"Understood. We'll hurry."

I headed for the residential area's dining hall with Mimi and Elma in tow. We would use this time to take a little break.

"Man, that was a little wild," I mused.

"A *little*?" Mimi asked, aghast.

"A little, yeah."

"Calling that *a little wild* sure sounds like Hiro. I could never."

We each ordered drinks from the Steel Chef 5 and sat down to relax. *Ahh, I love a cold drink after a battle.* My favorite flavor these days was

lemon. Mimi liked banana, and Elma seemed to like grape. Not that any of them used real fruit juice, of course! Ha!

I wasn't drinking the carbonated soda I'd stocked up on back at Sierra III. Why? Well, I preferred to enjoy it during quieter, calmer times when my heart could be at peace. Soda wasn't meant to be gulped down quickly between battles, especially not since I had a limited quantity. Those bottles were more precious to me than reactive torpedoes.

While we took a breather, I received a call on my handheld terminal. It was Lieutenant Commander Serena again. I brought her up on the dining hall's holo-display.

"Hey, hi. Hiro here."

Serena took in the scene through the holo-display, waited a beat, then spoke. "First, congratulations are in order. You've once again secured top ace."

"Thanks. Your quick covering fire really helped us out."

"That would be thanks to you setting the stage. The enemy diverted the greater part of their force toward the *Krishna* before the frontline battle could grow serious, allowing our front line to make it out nearly unscathed. Your assistance is greatly appreciated."

"Glad to hear it. So, is there a problem?"

"No problem. I simply wanted to congratulate you on your efforts, top ace. Soon we will crush our enemy once and for all. Know that we plan to resume the battle as soon as our small craft have finished resupplying."

"Aye aye." I saluted toward the holo-display. Lieutenant Commander Serena smiled slightly and hung up. I frowned. "What was that about?"

"Who knows?"

"Hmm…could she be plotting something?" I wondered aloud. Our history with Serena made it hard for our crew to trust her completely, but thinking back on our conversation, I couldn't find anything suspicious. It almost seemed like she'd *genuinely* called to congratulate us. "Well, I'll just take that as a sincere compliment."

"Are you sure…?"

“Nothing she said makes me think she’s scheming, at least.”

My girls *really* didn’t trust Serena. Take that as a lesson, kids: people remember the crazy things you do.

***

After finishing our resupply and quick checks, the *Krishna* once more launched from the *Black Lotus* and watched from a short distance as other mercenary ships docked for their own maintenance.

“Serena said there was only minor damage, but it looks like an awful lot of ships are busted up,” Mimi noted.

The *Krishna*’s main monitor was full of ships with torn plating and partially crystallized hulls.

“They must’ve taken charges from small crystals. Those little guys don’t have ranged attacks, but their charges really sting. And they’re dangerous—two or three hits and you can kiss your shield goodbye.”

Shields were designed to protect ships from impacts with asteroids and space debris during faster-than-light travel, and they were especially resistant to physical impacts. But crystal life-form charges easily tore through them. I’d noticed a harsh glow coming off the sharp edges of the crystals, so I figured it was related to that. But I couldn’t be sure—there hadn’t been much explanation in *SOL*. I just assumed they had some way of burning through shields like flak cannon fire did.

Incidentally, flak’s ability to tear through shields dropped precipitously the further you got from your target. If you tried firing from anywhere other than close range, your opponent would probably say something like, “Nice pellets, nerd!”

“You evaded them all so skillfully, Master Hiro.”

“They’re fast, but they have trouble making fine turns. You can outmaneuver them if you’re a decent pilot.”

Though it was still risky if a lot of them came at you at once from different directions. If that happened, you’d have to blast yourself a path

through them and get out of there. Your ship wouldn't last long if you took their charges without a shield. In *Stella Online*, the crystals could breach your hull by dealing continuous damage and greatly reducing your physical defense. Basically, the crystallized portions of your ship would be much more fragile.

A wide-field communication came through, interrupting our chat.

"This is Gil Fawkes, commander of the Special Crystal Extermination Fleet." It was the top brass. These were probably pre-launch instructions or something. "We will complete resupplying and critical maintenance in fifteen minutes. We will then press on to destroy the enormous crystal in the Alpha Sector of the Hierom System, the so-called Mother Crystal."

A 3D map of the battlefield appeared on the main monitor.

"We will attack the Mother Crystal via long-range bombardment. The enemy has great numbers, but they have no shielding capabilities and their defenses are feeble. Their ranged attacks are ineffective at long distances, giving them no way to stand up to the Imperial Fleet's assault."

The 3D map displayed a simulation of Imperial Fleet ships bombarding the crystal life-forms, culling their numbers.

"However, the sheer number of enemies means that some may leak through the front lines and approach us. Our small craft, which have fewer long-range attack capabilities than cruisers, will intercept enemy forces that slip through our fire."

"What do you think?" Elma asked me.

"Not bad," I replied. "The strategy is sound and shows a proper understanding of our enemy's abilities. They've also taken enemy numbers into account. It seems they've got a good grasp of the situation—it'll work."

The military wouldn't play anything by ear. They were professionals. They gathered information on the enemy, analyzed it, and only acted once they saw a clear route to victory. If they believed we could prevail with that strategy, then we probably could. Barring any unforeseen calamity, like someone throwing a Singing Crystal into our midst, our victory was basically guaranteed.

“If that’s your appraisal, then I’m satisfied for now. Are we diving in again?”

“We’ll see how it goes. Jumping in for no reason could block our allies’ line of fire, so I figure playing a by-the-books defense should do the trick for now. Even the *Krishna* doesn’t have the firepower to fight a Mother Crystal alone.”

If I could get in close and fire four or so reactive torpedoes at it, maybe I’d have a chance to take it down. But why do something so risky when I could let our allies shoot from afar? This time, we wouldn’t have much room to show off.

“We’ll choose the time and place of our next battle instead of skirmishing at a hyperlane exit. I think it’ll be a one-sided slaughter, honestly.”

Raid battles in *Stella Online* had always been an adrenaline rush, but in this world, there was no reason to wage a dangerous close-quarters battle if we didn’t have to. Stay out of range of the enemy, smash them, and get home safe—that’s what you do when real lives are on the line.

“So you think we’re gonna sit this one out on the sidelines?”

“Definitely.”

***

Thirty seconds later, the fleet exited FTL drive and took up firing position.

“Wowww… It’s huge.”

“Enormous…”

“That thing’s as big as a small planet.”

We watched the crystal life-forms through the *Black Lotus*’s sensors. The Guardian Crystals and smaller crystals noticed us immediately even from this distance—we could see them beginning to move in our direction.

“All ships, begin firing!”

On the commander's order, the Imperial Fleet began their long-range bombardment. Dozens of large-bore lasers fired toward the crystals simultaneously, the crystals reflecting their light and gleaming dazzlingly in the distance. The *Black Lotus* had deployed its large-bore railgun and fired *—Wait, what?*

"Mei, can you hit them from this far?" I asked.

"Yes. There are many targets to choose from."

There was a unique sound, like a *pchoom!*, as the *Black Lotus*'s large-bore railgun fired. I didn't know how many seconds it would take for it to reach its target, but I knew Mei wouldn't try it if she wasn't certain it'd hit.

"Wow! I can't believe she can aim so far away with that."

"Lasers are one thing, but EMLs normally never hit their mark."

EMLs might launch faster than normal multi-cannons or artillery, but they were leagues slower than lasers, which literally went the speed of light. There was no air or gravity in space to slow the projectile, but that didn't mean its trajectory couldn't change. That's not something you had to worry about in close-range battles, like small craft participated in, but when it came to firing on something really far away, the slightest error in adjustment could mean missing the mark by hundreds of kilometers.

"I guess that's positronic brains for you," I said. "It's incredible that the empire didn't bite the dust when they went to war with machines before."

"I have to agree," said Mimi.

"Oh, heh, yeah. Right…" Elma's answer was evasive.

Would it be more accurate to say that the machines had spared the empire and chosen not to annihilate them? Probably…

Meanwhile, the Imperial Fleet and a portions of the mercenaries continued their merciless bombardment of the enemy, decimating the Guardian Crystals' numbers. However, I could see some of the smaller crystals were weaving through the fire and approaching.

"Looks like the small ones can slip through," I mused.

"Are we going out there?"

“Yeah. The battle lines will probably develop around the corvettes and destroyers, so let’s get moving.”

“I’ll tell Mei,” Mimi said.

While Mimi contacted Mei, I floored it to join the battle unfolding around the destroyers at the front of the fleet. As I did, mercs all around started flooding the comms.

“Ooh, here comes Mr. Top Ace with his fancy award!”

“Haven’t you gotten enough kills? Save some for the rest of us!”

“I wouldn’t be a merc if I left money on the table, would I?” I replied. “It’s not my style to sit in the back, anyway.”

“You can say that again! You just *have* to be in the middle of the action, don’tcha.”

“You’ve charged into enemy lines plenty of times already. I know they call you ‘Psycho,’ but c’mon.”

“I feel bad for those girlies getting dragged into all that.”

“Hey ladies, how about you leave that sleazebag and come over to my ship?”

“Don’t try to get the jump on me! I make way more—”

“Stop hitting on my girls,” I demanded. “If you keep it up, I’ll shoot you down.”

“We’re so sorry!”

I didn’t like to make threats, but they’d overstepped. If I didn’t take a stand, people would look down on me.

“*Your girls*, huh?” Elma chuckled.

“Eh heh heh!” Mimi giggled.

I realized I’d said something a little bold, but it was too late to take it back. I looked away.

“He’s embarrassed!”

“Adorable.”

“Shut up! You’re messing up my focus. A moment’s misstep means death for us all.”

“We’re still really far from the enemy…”

I had no comeback to that.

Twelve minutes remained until interception.

***

Great spears of light shot out from hulking ships floating in the dead of space, and crystal life-forms shined like beacons as they were vaporized and blown up. Missiles flew drew arcs of light between the ships and the enemy as they plunged into the crystal swarm, swelling into huge fireballs as they landed.

The crystals were helpless against anti-ship reactive missiles, which they had no way of intercepting. Large torpedoes slammed into the crystals with powerful impacts and intense heat, mowing down the enemy’s frontline attackers.

“They’re much stronger than the *Krishna*’s reactive torpedoes, aren’t they?” Mimi said.

“Yeah, because they have more explosives. Bigger is stronger, in this case.”

“I see.”

Apparently reactive torpedoes had something even more dangerous than explosives on them, but it was true that the size of the missiles’ payload was the biggest contributor to their greater power.

This was true of lasers, too. The heavy laser cannons on the *Krishna* had about as much output as those of imperial heavy cruisers. But since the heavy cruisers had much larger cannons and were equipped to increase firing range, they had much longer range than the *Krishna*’s heavy laser cannons. Same as the missiles: bigger meant stronger.

“But they’ll definitely let a few slip through at this rate,” Elma muttered, watching the enemy blips on the radar.

She was right. It would be impossible to defeat thousands of crystals with bombardment alone. That was unavoidable.

“That’s enough watching. Let’s go. Generator output to battle mode!”

“Aye aye. Don’t blow it, okay?”

“Do I ever?”

And so, our long battle began.

***

“Damn! There’s way too many of ’em!”

“They’re coming from above! Watch out!”

“Aagh! Jean Ray’s gone down!”

I faced the small crystal life-forms calmly while mercs clamored over battlefield comms.

Our four heavy lasers each tore through a different target, and I destroyed small crystals that came for us head-on with flak. When crystals charged in from an angle where no weapon was pointed, I dodged them. The best way to evade enemies is to always have your eye on the near-field 3D radar.

“Look at those moves! Does he have eyes in the back of his head?!”

“If I had a ship like that, I could—”

“Hell no. Specs alone can’t do that.”

“Honestly, hats off to Hiro for not taking letting a single crystal attack slip through in a brawl like that.”

“Do you think he has superhuman spatial awareness?”

I heard idle chitchat not just from battlefield comms, but even from the girls next to me. The person I was now was the result of thousands of hours of training. Patterns of movement, thoughts, battle maneuvers… These were all deeply ingrained in my body and muscles. I made it look easy, but my skills were the result of blood, sweat, and tears.

Trying to make money when I was a newbie and having my ship explode, making money to afford a new ship and having *that* one explode, having to use a starting zabuton to make money to afford the repair costs of the lost ship… How many times had I nearly been blown to bits back then? My losses could be counted on both hands, before I'd learned how to get around without exploding.

Either way, I was a sore loser and didn't know when to give up, so I'd worked my ass off. I'd come up with new ideas. I'd looked at strategy forums, both in Japanese and other languages. I'd even watched videos. Such steady effort had turned me into the top ace I was now.

Of course, I never thought that those efforts would pay off quite like *this*, but altogether, it felt nice.

"Status report? What's the situation?" I asked Mimi to fill me in on the overall battle while I focused on maneuvering.

"Some small crystals are trickling through our defensive line from other areas, but our close-quarters rear defenses are managing them. Guardian Crystals have been 70 percent eliminated. They'll be totally wiped out soon."

"The fewer there are, the faster they can deal with them," Elma mused.

Indeed, if there was only a handful left, we could completely focus our firepower on the stragglers. If we could keep buying our forces the time they needed, our victory was certain.

"One last push!"

I'd been worried because I was down to half my flak, but as long as I didn't push too hard, we'd make it. If I held back too much there might be more casualties among our allies, though—it difficult to find a balance.

"Master Hiro! Enemy forces approaching from the port side!" Mimi called out, monitoring our long-range radar.

"Got it."

I'd overdone it a bit, dragging crystals from the next area over. Only one thing to do: I turned the *Krishna* and faced them head-on.

***

"The Guardian Crystals will soon be entirely eliminated."

"Once they're taken care of, move to our next planned coordinates and begin our multi-angular siege," I ordered.

"Aye aye."

I turned my eyes to the real-time battle data provided by the fleet and watched the situation progress. The Guardian Crystal extermination was going well, and the small crystals getting through were both within expected bounds and being dealt with swiftly.

The area he was in, especially, had very few slipping through. I'd checked his kill count moments ago, but he wasn't just a head or two above the other mercenaries—his small ship had taken out as many crystals as our large destroyers.

"That guy is the real deal, isn't he?"

"He truly is," I agreed, but it went without saying. Hiro was a mercenary worthy of the Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge. If he kept on like this, people might even begin to doubt the strength of the Imperial Fleet.

The Imperial Fleet had recorded all his achievements and battle data since his arrival in the Izulux System. They would be public record, making it much easier for him to get work from here on out. That would also lead to more headaches in his future…but such was the price of fame and glory.

"Do you think he'll be the next platinum ranker?"

"That depends on the mercenary guild, but it's possible."

He would garner attention as a living recipient of the Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge. The mercenary guild would no doubt welcome a new platinum ranker. Even without the Imperial Fleet's push, they would likely support him as a candidate.

"The Guardian Crystal elimination is complete!"

"Very good. Proceed to the next phase of this battle. Once we have moved to the designated coordinates, begin synchronized bombardment."

“Aye aye!”

As the battle approached its conclusion, the *Lestarius* began to move once more.

***

“They’re not pressing us as hard.”

“The battleships and cruisers have finished destroying the Guardian Crystals and begun encircling the Mother Crystal. The small crystals have scattered in response,” Mimi informed me.

“Tch. That’s no good.”

That meant that the battle was beginning to spread past the front line. We might be better off culling the small crystals’ numbers a bit before encircling them, but I hadn’t shared that strategy with Serena.

If I didn’t intervene, we would probably still achieve a guaranteed victory, but at this rate, we would inevitably take damages to the troops at the rear.

“There’s no choice. Mimi, activate FTL drive,” I said, turning off our weapons system. We couldn’t use FTL drive when weapons were deployed.

“Huh?”

“Just start it. Trust me.”

“O-okay! Charging faster-than-light drive. Counting down. Five, four…”

When I heard our FTL drive charging, I turned the ship’s bow away from the Mother Crystal.

“H-Hiro, what are you doing?” Elma sounded confused next to me.

Mercenaries nearby realized that the *Krishna* was entering FTL drive and began to shout over the comms.

“H-hey! Where the hell are you—”

“Don’t you run away—”

I ignored them all and focused on Mimi's countdown.

"Three, two, one… Activating!"

Boom! There came that glorious roar as FTL drive activated—but I immediately deactivated it and returned to normal space. The two *boom*s overlapped, nearly simultaneous.

I turned the ship toward the Mother Crystal far up ahead and ordered, "Mimi, begin charging FTL drive again."

"Y-you got it! Charging faster-than-light drive!"

By traveling through FTL in an odd direction for a very short period of time, I could detour around the small crystals between the Mother Crystal and the front lines. By doing it again, I could slip right next to the Mother Crystal. This was one useful technique for soloing giant targets.

Of course, by posing such a clear threat to the Mother Crystal, I would draw all of the small crystal life-forms closing in on the rearguard back toward the *Krishna*. As a result, we would end up right in between the mother and its babies…but hey, I could manage.

"Charging faster-than-light drive. Counting down. Five, four, three, two, one… Activating!"

Once again, two *boom*s overlapped, and the urchin-like enormous crystal was right before our eyes.

"I-it's huge…!"

"That's…"

"Focus, ladies!" I immediately reactivated the weapons system, fired the thrusters at maximum power, and approached the Mother Crystal. It was time to start the final round.

***

"What are you doing?! What the hell is going on?!" Elma screeched.

"I'm doing my damnedest to make sure you girls get out of this alive, of course!"

The crystal urchin up ahead was so large that “enormous” was an understatement. Its surface, covered in nigh-infinite thorns, burst open and sent shards flying—small crystal life-forms, which swiftly closed in on the *Krishna*.

“E-enemies are appearing at an exponential rate!”

“Boom! Take this!” I shouted at the Mother Crystal.

As Mimi had indicated, the swarm of crystals multiplied at incredible speed. I launched two anti-ship reactive torpedoes at them. The Mother Crystal had responded to a hostile’s sudden approach by trying to overwhelm us with numbers. There was one way to deal with that: mow them down with a wide-range attack before they could overwhelm us.

In launching the torpedoes, I would also draw the Mother Crystal’s ire. My strategy here was to make her recall the small crystal life-forms closing in on our rear and make her splinter off as many small ones from her own body as possible.

The Mother Crystal could create countless small crystal life-forms, but that didn’t mean they were *limitless*. Small crystals were ultimately pieces of the mother’s own body.

Another way of look at it was that the small crystals were the Mother Crystal’s plating and hull. The more she ejected to deal with approaching threats, the more fragile she would become, making it easier for our long-range firepower to deal the fatal blow.

“Torpedoes have landed!” Mimi announced.

Two anti-ship reactive torpedoes landed on the Mother Crystal’s huge spikes, creating two large fireballs that destroyed the tips of those enormous structures and the small crystal life-forms within.

If I aimed between the spikes and reached the center of the crystal, I could deal some critical hits—but I didn’t have time for that now. I was busy slaughtering approaching crystals with heavy lasers and large-bore flak cannons, so it would be too difficult to aim that precisely. Things might’ve been different if I had ten others with me.

“Master Hiro! Here comes the bombardment!”

“Roger that!”

I couldn't let us get caught in friendly fire, so I circled around out of the range of the bombardment. The mother was already deploying her giant thorns to resist. How did she know to switch to defense before those attacks landed? Maybe the Mother Crystal was actually highly intelligent, although we couldn't understand her thoughts.

While I dealt with the small crystals charging for me, the Mother's thick plating, made from massive, concentrated needles, emitted harsh light as it melted and burst, shaking the fabric of space itself.

"That thing's a real monster. It didn't even budge after all that."

"It sure is incredible that it didn't move. How does that work, I wonder?"

The crystal had been hammered by high-output lasers in a space with no gravity, and a part of it had vaporized and exploded… You'd think that even an object that massive would be pushed by the force of the impact, but the Mother Crystal seemed locked in place.

And it wasn't that it was so big we couldn't see its movements; it really hadn't shifted so much as a millimeter. What an odd technique. If you could figure out how that worked and replicate it with technology, you could probably make a mint.

"If we keep up the bombardment—" *It'll go down eventually*, I tried to say.

But before I could get the words out, something flew at incredible speed directly into the exhausted Mother Crystal's densely spiked plating, stabbing straight through and sending bits of crystals flying out explosively in all directions.

"KRAAAAAAAAAH!" There was an unpleasant sound like nails on glass, and I had the sudden urge to cover my ears. Yet I didn't take my hands off the controls—was that not worthy of praise?

"Agh! What was that?!" Elma shouted, pained.

"I don't know, but it sounds like it worked."

The Mother Crystal glimmered blindingly, and its countless spikes writhed with a disconcerting noise. It was honestly kind of gross, like watching an insect's legs twitch as it dies. It sent a chill down my spine.

I couldn't be sure, but I had a feeling the thing that had stabbed into the Mother Crystal was a shot from the *Black Lotus*'s large railgun. I hadn't seen any Imperial Fleet ships using artillery, and no mercenary ships here other than the *Black Lotus* looked to be equipped with any, either.

"Umm…th-the small crystals are starting to act weird…" I guess that screeching sound really got to her, because Mimi sounded about ready to cry as she made her report.

The enemy must be trying to refocus its forces on the ship as our rear that had dealt so much damage to its main body.

If you're distracted, then I guess it's time for me to make some mischief, huh?

"I don't like the look on your face," Elma said.

"Don't be rude."

I put the pedal to the metal and rocketed straight for the Mother Crystal. Why was I playing this little game of chicken? Why, to add the speed of my ship to the flight speed of my anti-ship reactive torpedoes, of course. Normally, these torpedoes flew slowly and were hard to hit enemies with, but we could use this speed-up technique to make up for that drawback.

"Goooo!" I aimed for a brief opening in the writhing mass of thorns and fired my last two torpedoes. As soon as they were off, I flipped my the ship around to run away. It'd be incredibly lame if I went so fast that we crashed right into the Mother Crystal and became space-buzzard food.

"Eep! That was close…"

"You almost gave me a heart attack!"

I heard relieved voices and complaints, but I brushed them off. When we were far enough away, I turned the ship back around to assess the results of our attack.

"Oh? What's this?"

There was no explosion. Had I misfired? I worried for a moment, but these imperial-made goods were reliable—we soon saw that they worked just fine.

The Mother Crystal that had been immobile until now shuddered. At the same time, an unbearable sound seemed to pierce through my mind even before it reached my ears.

"GRA—"

"Whoa?!"

"Huh?!"

"Ack!"

The impact pressed me back into my seat. I experienced a chilling sensation, like a stick had been thrust into my brain and churned about. Acid crept up from my stomach. *What the hell is this? Some sort of nervous system attack?*

While I blinked my eyes to recover, the Mother Crystal underwent an intense change. Its dense cluster of thorns began to flicker and lose their light, as if their vitality was visibly seeping away, and its body began to come apart. It seemed that—unfortunately for the Mother Crystal, and fortunately for us—one of my torpedoes had struck the core deep within. A critical hit.

"Did we finish it off?"

"It…looks like it."

"The small crystals have stopped moving, too."

At Mimi's report, I checked for myself and saw that the small crystals buzzing around had all gone still. They were still flying thanks to their inertia from before, but they showed no signs of changing direction under their own power.

"Honestly…a little anticlimactic," Elma commented.

"It really was."

"Hmmm…" I didn't remember these things being weak enough to fold with only two direct anti-ship reactive torpedo hits to the core, but… *maybe Stella Online* had gamified the process a bit more? I could think about it all I liked, but I didn't think I'd get a clear answer.

Fishing for an explanation, Elma suggested, "We humans die when our brains or hearts are crushed. I guess that's the same for crystals…

probably."

"Perhaps so…"

"Well, it makes sense," I shrugged. "Even the strongest ships sink if you shoot through their generator." Either way, it was good that we'd managed to finish it off. Our dangerous venture had been rewarded.

Just then, a direct communication came in—not a wide-field one. I ordered Mimi to accept it. Lieutenant Commander Serena's twitching face appeared onscreen.

"Greetings, Captain Hiro."

"Oh, hey. Greetings…?" I replied nervously. Despite her poised opening, her aura seemed unusual. *Huh? Uh, is she mad at me?*

"Might I ask you to show your ugly mug aboard the *Lestarius*? We'll begin our discussion in earnest there."

"U-uh, yes, ma'am. W-we'll be there right away," I answered promptly. She clearly wouldn't take no for an answer. As soon as she heard my confirmation, she hung up. "Huh…? Did I do something to make her mad?"

"Who knows?" Elma cocked her head.

"Umm…not me." Mimi looked uneasy.

What did I do now? I raised an eyebrow as I activated FTL drive and made for the *Lestarius*, where Serena awaited me.

***

"First things first. Congratulations on your surprise upset."

When I saw Serena's smile, I froze instantly. Now there was a fake, plastered-on grin.

"Uh, yes, ma'am."

We had come to meet Serena in her office on the battleship *Lestarius*. After the death of the Mother Crystal, the other crystals had all stopped moving at once—so at that point, the battle had ended.

Now all of the ships were probably busy recovering loot and collecting various kinds of data. Even the *Lestarius* had parked right next to the fallen Mother Crystal.

"Umm, Miss Lieutenant Commander Serena?" Mimi spoke up. "Why have you summoned Mas—I mean…Captain Hiro?"

I guess Mimi was hesitant to put me on the same level as Serena in public. She shied away from her usual moniker and called me "Captain." This might've been the first time.

"I'm so glad you asked," Serena replied coldly. "I could have summoned you here for disobeying orders, fleeing from the enemy, or acting recklessly in the face of danger, but I wouldn't bother calling a mercenary in for any of those things. No, indeed I would not. As you are not members of the military, I cannot reprimand you, either."

An ominous aura emanated from Serena's sharp grin. *Her eyebrow is twitching! So scary!*

"Incidentally, Mimi… How would you feel if you had done so much work on your own, contributed so much to the plan…only to see the results snatched away just before this plan came to fruition?"

Mimi shook like a leaf under Serena's gaze and squeaked out an answer. "U-umm… H-how dare he? I think?"

Serena nodded in satisfaction and smiled even wider. "Yes, yes, quite right. In order to conceal my source and his unverified information, I fabricated a data analysis and exploited my connections to the fullest, walking the thinnest of tightropes to gather this fleet to destroy the crystals. After so many sacrifices, we finally put our blade to the Mother Crystal's neck. And in that very *final* moment, the credit was snatched away. It's hardly surprising that I might take issue with that…don't you agree?"

"Eep…"

As Serena got more and more heated, she spoke faster and faster. Watching her, I started to trembling.

"Hear me out, okay?" I said. "Things were getting hairy for our rearguard, so I cheated a bit and used FTL to get close to the crystal. All I

wanted to do was pull a little prank on the Mother Crystal so she'd send her babies after me, okay?"

"Then how did things turn out like that?!"

"Uhh, I got lucky? Or you got unlucky? Both, maybe… Whoa, hold on! Hold on! No need for swords, okay?! Stay!" I spread both hands and held them out toward Serena, who'd jumped to her feet and put a hand on the hilt of her sword. *Tch. I should've brought Mei with us!*

Unruffled, Elma cut in. "That's enough theatrics, I think. So, what do you want?"

Was complaining not Serena's main goal in calling us here?

Lieutenant Commander Serena heaved a deep sigh and plunked powerlessly back down in her desk chair. Where had that intimidating aura from a moment ago gone?

"Well, I am the one who incorporated you into this plan. And despite your surprise upset, the strategy I proposed was a success. We've achieved our goal, so my…outburst…from before was merely an opportunity to vent my feelings at having the credit for this operation's success stolen from me at the last second."

"I really just wanted to save our rearguard from additional casualties from the crystals that had slipped through our defenses. Please forgive me."

"Yes, yes, I forgive you. As for 'fleeing from the enemy,' your innocence is proven by the battle data taken from the *Krishna* and the observation data from the *Lestarius* itself. Most of all, you are the MVP today. A hero."

Huh? Why do I have a bad feeling about this?

"We believe in proper rewards and punishments here," Serena continued mercilessly. "I believe I mentioned that to you recently."

She tapped her desk's console and brought up a holo-display. The object that appeared looked like some kind of military achievement award. It was similar to the Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge I'd been decorated with before, but this one was a different color. It was gold, rather than silver, and a different shape. This one was a medal with a cross etched

on it and a round red jewel set in the center. A silver line ran around the perimeter like a halo.

"It looks expensive."

"I should hope so. This is the First-Magnitude Star's Cross of Brilliance, more commonly known as the Gold Star. Have you heard of it?"

"I have not." I turned to Mimi and Elma. Mimi was wide-eyed with surprise, while Elma looked bitter. It seemed they knew something I didn't.

"I believe it is known to the rest of your crew. It is awarded to those who have performed great exploits in battle. The Gold Star is effectively the highest award that can be given to a mercenary, and even then, it is extremely rare. You may be the fourth person in the empire's entire history to receive it."

"W-wow… Fourth person ever, huh?" Even I could understand the weight of an award only three other mercenaries had ever received.

"No final decision had been made. But given your role in this battle, as well as your accomplishment of finishing off this mother of beasts which was previously impenetrable to us, I believe it is very likely it will be awarded to you. If not a Gold Star, I'm certain you will at least receive a Silver Star." Serena displayed another award on her holo-display, this one silver with a blue stone. "Anyway, we—the senior officers of the fleet formed to annihilate the crystal life-forms—believe that you will probably receive the Gold Star. All that remains for us is to report the results."

"I-I see… So, um, we're free to head out as soon as we collect our rewards back in the Izulux System. Right?"

"Hee hee hee."

"Ha ha ha…"

We both laughed, but she seemed to be genuinely mirthful, while I was sweating bullets.

After a few more moments of laughter, Serena suddenly became serious. "Of course not. You will accompany us back to the capital."

"I shoulda known." Such a significant award wouldn't be given at a frontier outpost in the Izulux System. I'd expected that it would be some

big fancy-schmancy ceremony, and it seemed I was spot-on. “I’d really prefer to refuse it all together…”

“Is it your intention to insult us?”

“Damn you, state authority!”

No matter how much I bragged about being a free mercenary, in reality, we were more like military sub-contractors. Especially people like me, who made most of our money killing space pirates. The mercenary guild could protect us from being abused by the military, but they wouldn’t protect me just because I wanted to spit in their faces by avoiding an award ceremony.

“Elma, Elma!” Mimi piped up. “Just think—the imperial capital! I’ve wanted to go there ever since I saw it on holo-TV.”

“Yep. It’s just as incredible as you’re imagining, since it’s the center of government and the whole economy.”

As I despaired, Mimi and Elma chatted excitedly behind me. *You two seem to be having a great time back there.*

“But as crew members, I think we’ll have to show up at the ceremony, too,” said Elma.

Mimi fell silent. *So I’ll be taking them in, too? Well…at least I won’t be alone. Ha ha ha…*

“And that is how the situation currently stands,” Serena continued. “After completing our business here, we will return to the Izulux System, resupply, and head directly to the capital. Oh, and don’t worry—I haven’t forgotten our promise from before. We should have those materials we discussed available at the Izulux System outpost. The events today will bolster the empire’s prestige, so we will publicize what has happened here widely. You will become famous overnight, and I imagine the high-quality crystals you bring home will sell for an outrageous price. Good for you.”

Serena grinned gleefully. She’d been trying to recruit me into the military for a while now, so I’m sure she found this very damn funny. No doubt she’d try to gradually bring me under her wing as one of her subordinates. I had only joined the battle against the crystals at her

invitation, after all—and there was no doubt in my mind that she'd use that to her advantage.

"Just so you know, I have no intention of joining the military," I reminded her.

"Yes, I'm quite aware. It wouldn't be right to force you. To be perfectly honest, I wouldn't want a subordinate like you, and the restrictions of the military would strip you of your best qualities. We've been acquainted for some time—I at least understand that much by now." Serena's reply was unexpected, and I internally tilted my head in confusion. "That said, whether I understand is a separate matter from whether the military understands, let alone what the nobles of the capital think. I suggest you lean on the mercenary guild there."

"Gee, how'd I get so lucky?"

"Keep being rude, and I'll discipline you myself."

She patted the hilt of her sword, and I saluted in a panic.

"Most sincere apologies," I replied.

"Hmph. That is all I have to say. Return to your ship and get some rest. And don't even think about running away."

"Yes, ma'am."

Serena nodded in satisfaction.

"By the way, Lieutenant Commander…"

"Yes?"

"How about those military weapons you promised? Verbal or not, a promise is a promise. If you don't keep your word, I can't say it won't affect our relationship in the future."

"I haven't forgotten. You'll have more options in the capital than here, though. Since we're headed there, wouldn't you prefer to choose when we arrive? You'll have your pick of the litter."

"That is true."

"That will do for now," she said. "I'm sure we both have preparations to make, so let us disperse."

“Aye aye, ma’am.”

The ever-busy Serena had dismissed us, so we obediently left. The leader of a small fleet probably had a lot of work to get through. Perhaps if she happened to take a break, I’d join her for a little recreation.

Epilogue

WHEN WE RETURNED to the *Black Lotus*, I told Mei about our exchange with Lieutenant Commander Serena. She looked satisfied and said, “I would expect no less from my master.”

Her brows were relaxed, and her lips curled up just slightly. It was the most minute of changes, but that was big coming from someone who was emotionless 99 percent of the time.

“That lucky shot was also thanks to your incredible timing on the EML, Mei. You timed it so it would land right on the heels of their synchronized bombardment, right?”

“Why yes, thank you for noticing.”

EMLs might have had one of the fastest firing rates among artillery weapons, but they were nowhere near as fast as laser cannons. How had she timed it so perfectly with the fleet’s bombardment? I couldn’t imagine how she’d calculated and calibrated the interval, but it was clearly a godlike skill beyond the realm of human minds.

“However, it was you who dealt the finishing blow to that beast. I believe that was also a godlike maneuver.”

“Don’t put me on too high a pedestal, or I might get cocky.” Despite my words, it still felt good to hear her say that. There’s no man who doesn’t love to be praised, especially by such a beautiful maid. Hell, this was wonderful.

“Though it looks like he’s gotten himself forced into in a formal ceremony in the capital,” Elma chuckled.

“Could you stop raining on my parade, please?”

“B-but Master Hiro, it’s the *capital*! The very center of the empire! A holy land of culture and cuisine!”

“Mimi, you’re gonna have to come to the ceremony, too…”

“Ulp…! I-I’ll be fine as long as I have you two!” Mimi cowered for a moment, but she quickly recovered and said something cute. *Mimi, you’re*

adorable. How about I tousle your hair? Tousle tousle tousle…

"When we get to the capital, we'll have to get our butts in gear. Hiro's fine for now, but we'll need formal clothes for me and Mimi," said Elma.

"Why am I fine?"

"Remember when you got those digs back on Sierra III?"

"Oh, right!" I said.

Chris had picked out nobleman's clothes for me. They were just sitting in the closet now, but I'd kept them perfectly preserved. It had honestly felt like the clothes were wearing me more than I as wearing the clothes, but Chris and the other girls had approved, so they were probably acceptable.

"I'll pay for your clothes, so money is no object," I offered.

"I appreciate the offer, but it'll get expensive pretty quick if we include accessories," Elma warned me.

"Even with clothes and accessories combined, they can't possibly cost much more than a fully-upgraded zabuton ship, right?"

"I guess not, but…"

Zabuton was the common name for the multi-role spaceship known for being the first ride of newbie mercenaries. It cost about 800,000 Ener to get a fully upgraded one. We could easily carve that much out of the payout we'd receive after this little excursion.

"I can't wait!" Mimi squealed.

"Yeah, sure. Same."

I wasn't thrilled, but I played along since Mimi was so into it. Space around the capital was probably extremely safe, so it wasn't a very attractive place for pirate-hunting mercs like me. Still, we might be able to see some rare and spectacular sights there. I could get a little excited for that.

***

“The capital, huh?” Tina murmured. “Sounds fun. Betcha they’ve got tons of liquor we’ve never even heard of.”

“Sis…that’s not all that’s in the capital.”

“What? What else would I care about?”

“Our capital office.”

“…”

For some reason, the twins now both bore the lifeless expression of Tibetan sand foxes. Did they have some problem with Space Dwergr’s capital office? Maybe it was just such a major office that they’d have to report there, and they didn’t want to? Well, whatever it was, I didn’t care enough to interrogate them about it right now.

Elma was also oddly quiet compared to usual, as if something was troubling her. Ever since it had become clear that we’d have to go to the capital, she’d started drinking alone more often. And then she’d shove her way into my room and demand attention. Was it just me, or was she becoming emotionally unstable?

Mei was her usual stoic self, of course.

“Capital, capital!” Mimi was the only genuinely enthusiastic one among us.

As for me…I was in the same boat as the twins. How could I be enthused when that stuffy ceremony was waiting for me?

“You’re really excited, huh, Mimi?”

“I’m excited for the food, but it’s also the center of fashion, music, art, and, well…everything! Oh, I can’t wait, I can’t wait!” She smiled and returned to flipping through an imperial capital sightseeing guide on her tablet.

I couldn’t help but notice a whole lot of checkmarks on its digital pages. Was she planning to visit *all* those places? Surely not, right? Also, what was the scale on that map? How big was the capital, exactly?

“Master.”

I turned around at the sound of Mei's voice and saw her holding an unfamiliar object. It was a short, black, metallic pole that gleamed in the light. A security baton, maybe? She had two of them.

"Hey, what's up? I see you've got…batons?"

"Yes. These security batons are made from super-compressed material. You can link them together to create a staff as well."

She demonstrated linking them together, creating a security staff. When linked, they were about as long as Serena's sword. *Okay, cool. Not sure what the point of this thing is, though.*

"We have free time, so I was hoping to give you lessons."

"Lessons?"

"Yes, Master. Lessons in swordplay."

***

Now perhaps you're wondering: why would nobles still swing swords around in a universe where you could shoot someone dead with a laser beam? And even stranger: why were they feared? It turned out that there was a solid reason for that—though I personally found it peculiar.

Let's talk about swords first. They had served as symbols of the authority held by the Grakkan Empire's noble class since long ago. That in itself was not strange to me. Earth had European knights, Japanese samurai, and other such groups for whom the sword was a symbol of their occupation and calling. It would be no surprise if imperial nobility clung to the tradition as a vestige of the good old days as they maintained the feudal system on a galaxy-spanning scale.

Of course, tradition couldn't overcome the fact that guns are stronger than swords, so they truly were nothing but symbolic for a time. For hundreds of years, nobles had carried both swords and guns on their hips.

Things had changed, however, with the advent of biotechnology. To aid in their grand duties, nobles began to enhance and strengthen their bodies through cybernetics and biotech. Before long, this trend had become

the status quo. At first, this was only a means of extending their lifespan or accessing more of their brains, but the techniques used to enhance brain function ended up blessing these nobles with dramatically improved information processing abilities.

The advancement of materials engineering continued to improve swords as well, and the ancient swordplay still practiced by the nobles evolved alongside their powered-up bodies and minds.

True masters of swordsmanship had always been able to cut bullets out of the air with their swords, but now, these nobles with strengthened bodies and minds achieve such feats with relative ease.

And body and mind enhancement did not stop there; research into new technologies continued to this very day, and as technology improved, so did noble sword techniques. Weapons that fired bullets using gunpowder were replaced by laser weapons and became a thing of the past, but today's nobles could deflect even laser beams traveling at the speed of light with only their swords. Depending on the situation, they could even reflect the laser back at its user as a counterattack.

My J*di assessment from before was truly apt.

And that brings us to me today…

"No no no no I can't I can't—gaaaaaah!"

"Crazy how he can beat her back even while saying he can't," Tina mused.

"Sure is," Elma agreed.

In the center of the floor, I crossed swords with Mei. Or, well, she was holding super-compressed security batons, so maybe "crossed swords" wasn't the right expression. I mean, who cares? I had bigger fish to fry.

With a chilling *whoosh*, the black metal baton in Mei's left hand closed in on me. I desperately tried to evade—but I wasn't fast enough, so I blocked her blow with the sword in my right hand. Unfortunately, I knew from experience that if I just whacked away her attacks with my sword, she would end up deflecting my strikes and hurting me in the end.

I held my breath. The moment I did, time began to stretch out, the incredibly fast-moving baton suddenly moving as slowly as if it was

swinging toward me underwater.

If I met her blow with my sword, I would lose to her weapon's weight and power, not to mention her superior speed. I only had one option: I had to aim for the only weak point I could reach. I swung my sword, accurately and efficiently, toward the hand holding the baton.

"Ah…!"

The swift arc of the baton abruptly changed trajectory, now springing toward my face instead in a direct thrust. I bent my head slightly to evade Mei's strike, then deflected her baton upward and swung my left-hand sword at Mei's undefended torso—or at least, I tried. With a chop of her right hand, she smacked the flat of the sword, arresting its momentum. Her strike was so powerful it knocked the sword entirely out of my hand.

"Guh?!"

She extended her right hand and grabbed my neck, squeezing while lifting me up. A perfect Neck Hanging Tree.

"Winning against Mei is impossible…" I grumbled once she released her grip. Our physical specs were worlds apart.

"No, you do not need to win. Master, was that your first time wielding a sword?"

"I guess I used to swing sticks around with other kids when I was little, but that's about it."

It had surprised me when she came at me out of nowhere with the batons, saying she wanted to test my strength before we began our lessons. But Mei was kind enough to hold back—she only left some purpling bruises when she hit me. If she'd used her full power, my bones would've been broken in an instant. *Ha ha ha… Everything hurts…*

"Are you asking because you think I have a natural affinity for the sword?" I asked.

"No, I highly doubt that."

"Oh…" Disappointing. I'd kind of gotten my hopes up.

"Your footwork, your stance, and the way you handle your weapon are all beginner level. However—your reflexes and the way you use the

blade are quite unusual. Have you truly not received any bodily augments?"

"Not that I remember, at least."

How I'd gotten to this world was unclear, so I couldn't say with certainty. But if I had any obvious augmentation, Dr. Shouko would've said something when she'd examined me. So I could assume I had none.

"At any rate, it is wonderful that your reaction speed rivals that of augmented nobles. Your physical strength is within the bounds of an ordinary, well-trained human, but the speed of your reactions will allow you to stand up to any aggressive nobles."

"I'd really rather not fight those monsters without power armor anyway."

"There may be a situation in which you are dragged into a fight against your will. Of course, I will never let an adversary lay a hand on you if I am there to accompany you—but we must be prepared for the worst."

"Guess that's fair…"

Remembering the various trouble I'd been dragged into so far, I calculated the odds of getting caught up in a swordfight. *Yeah, seems basically unavoidable to me. Someone's gonna start something. I can feel it.*

"Do not worry," she said confidently. "I have high-performance education and swordplay instruction assets installed."

"Cool."

"In the next seventy-two hours, I will make you a fantastic swordsman, Master."

"O-oh…?"

"Now, let us begin. I've procured a VR teaching device for exactly such an occasion. First, we will begin with the basics of how to hold and swing a sword, how to find your center of gravity, and improving your footwork. I will hold nothing back."

Mei stowed her security batons away somewhere and retrieved a thin, flexible whip. *Eep…that thing looks painful.*

***

Today, you probably know the Izulux System as a flourishing sector—but back then, it was only a frontier system containing a single frontline outpost, and it was this outpost from which the battle between the Imperial Fleet and the crystal life-forms was launched. All the territory from Izulux to the Hierom System, where rare crystals are mined to this very day, was just one of many uncharted frontiers.

The danger posed by the crystal life-forms, which still serve as a bountiful source of rare crystals today, made these systems treacherous in those days. At that time, the biology of crystal life-forms was still unknown, making them a major threat to the empire.

To make matters more difficult, tensions were worsening between the empire and neighboring nations such as the Belbellum Federation. With so many unexplored frontier systems at its borders, the empire took a passive stance when it came to frontier systems inhabited by crystals.

So what had allowed the empire to aggressively invest resources into the development of this sector? That would be their decisive victory in the Crystal War, made possible by a certain portion of the Imperial Fleet and the mercenaries it hired. This battle resulted in the total annihilation of the sector's crystals.

Despite crystal biology being relatively unknown at the time of this battle, the crystals' habits of expanding to surrounding systems was a recognizable pattern. As a result, the Imperial Fleet gathered enough forces in the Izulux System to finally fend off the crystal life-forms.

In the ensuing battle, one mercenary gloriously stepped onto the stage of history for the first time. You all know him well: Captain Hiro. The Defense of the Izulux System was his first of many exploits in the empire's public historical record.

While on a transportation request to bring supplies to the Izulux System's forward outpost, Captain Hiro found that the Imperial Fleet was already embroiled in battle against the crystal life-forms.

Incredibly, when Captain Hiro appeared on the battlefield, he charged into a massive swarm of crystal life-forms, dealing fatal damage to several large crystals and drawing the attention of smaller ones. Captain Hiro acted as bait to buy time while the Imperial Fleet—who had been fighting a defensive battle up to that point—regrouped and attacked their enemies.

Moreover, his vessel emerged from the battle unscathed. For his heroic efforts, he was awarded the Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge.

In the Imperial Fleet, it was customary to send reconnaissance units into unexplored sectors following a crystal life-form attack to ascertain whether the enemies had reinforcements. The outpost commander followed that precedent. Normally, these units would perform a quick search before returning home, but this time, two abnormal elements were present. It goes without saying that one element was Captain Hiro…but the other was on the side of the Imperial Fleet.

Given the involvement of both the Imperial Fleet and Captain Hiro in this incident, you may already have an idea of what that second element might be. Within said reconnaissance fleet was Admiral Serena Holz—at the time, Lieutenant Commander—and her Pirate-Hunting Unit.

Despite heavy casualties, the reconnaissance fleet managed to locate the center of the crystal horde, the Mother Crystal, in the Hierom System. Based on the information they brought back, General Serena Holz formulated a strategy to eradicate the crystal life-forms plaguing the outpost. Outpost administration approved her plan, and a temporary combined fleet was formed.

The combined fleet waged a heroic battle in the Hierom System and succeeded in destroying the Mother Crystal. Even in this battle, Captain Hiro stole the show. He closed in on the Mother Crystal alone and fired anti-ship reactive torpedoes directly into its core.

After that battle, he would be known as Captain “Psycho” Hiro by his mercenary associates.

The remains of that planet-sized Mother Crystal, its core destroyed with perfect precision, stands in the Hierom System to this day. The system is now fully incorporated into the territory of the Grakkan Empire, and serves as a bountiful source of rare crystals to this very day.

EX:
Lieutenant Commander Serena's Day Off

UNFORTUNATELY, it would be inaccurate to call the forces stationed within the Izulux System the Imperial Fleet's main force. If anything, it was second-rate. The newest ship among them was our own *Lestarius*, while the others posted there were old ships that were two or even three generations old.

In the case of the ships that were a full three generations old, even setting firepower completely aside, fighting at close range was difficult. When engaging multiple small enemies, these ships required carriers and corvettes for defense. However, at the moment, our defensive forces were lacking both types of smaller ships. Most of the ships here were old and firepower-focused, so the balance was simply off.

Thus, due to the makeup of our fleet, our second expedition would demand not just military forces, but coordination with the mercenary guild as well. In other words, we needed to hire mercenary small craft to shore up our defenses. In truth, a certain number of mercenaries lingered within the Izulux System precisely because they knew of our needs in this area.

In order to coordinate with them, I donned my military uniform on my off-duty day and traveled in person to the mercenary guild.

I rather bulldozed them in negotiations—after all, I was not just as a lieutenant commander of the Imperial Fleet, but the daughter of Marquess Holz as well. The marquess had great influence over both the guild and many arms dealers. Though I was a little hesitant to use my family's influence at times like this, I had to use whatever I could—especially if it meant protecting my subordinates.

On the way out of the guild, I happened to run into a certain man at the building's entrance.

"Ack!" The moment we locked eyes, he made an unintelligible noise of disgust.

"*Ack*? Why are you 'ack'ing me?"

Personally, I found it deeply inappropriate to make such a noise before someone of my status. But perhaps it was not so inappropriate among mercenaries? Putting the question of polite behavior, I was naturally displeased to hear such a noise from him.

"I've been thinking for a while now…aren't you a little *excessively* mean to me? Titles and status aside, it's disgraceful to treat an eligible young woman like this."

"I can't argue with that. But it's kind of, you know…instinctual?" He grinned wryly at my scolding. Even for someone as even-tempered as myself, his remarks were infuriating.

"I can't imagine a ruder statement than admitting you're 'instinctually' disgusted by me." A muscle in my cheek twitched from raw fury.

Perhaps it's not my place to say this, but I do fancy myself something of a beauty. My facial features are, I believe, objectively beautiful. I repeat this because it's important. My figure isn't so bad, either. I exercise between busy periods at work, so any fashion modeling agency would be happy to have me—in my opinion.

Faced with my ire, the offender put his hands together in a pitiful display of apology. "Sorry. Honestly. See me begging for forgiveness?"

Hmph.

"So you've apologized. Why don't you show your contrition through your actions, then?"

"Come again?"

My question left him in wide-eyed shock. *Good. I like that look on your face. It satisfies the soul.*

"Take me somewhere fun. Now. You will be my escort."

"Now that's pretty ridiculous… And are you sure you wanna go out dressed like that?"

"At this outpost, you will find more people in military uniform than in casual clothes. I'm not worried about it." I punctuated my statement with a shrug. I would stand out walking around other colonies like this, but here

within this Izulux System outpost, casual clothes would be more conspicuous.

"All right. Just so you know, though, I don't really know my way around."

"You've gone out with your crew, haven't you? Take me wherever you went with them."

"Uhh…it would be a pretty boring place for you." He turned hesitant.

Yet his hesitation only made me more curious. Had I always been such a contrarian?

"Your unwillingness piques my interest. Take me there, please," I said.

"Okay… Just so you know, I warned you. I'm don't want to hear any complaints." With that, he turned to leave. Come to think of it, he was on his way into the guild office—did he not have something to do here?

"Do you not have business at the mercenary guild?"

"I was just popping in since I was free." He shrugged without breaking his stride.

But he matched his walking pace to mine, showing that he was used to walking with women. This philanderer pissed me off just a little bit.

"Coordinating everything for the mission is a big job, right? Are you sure you have time to mess around?" he asked, glancing over to see my reaction as he walked.

Hmm. Looking at him like this, I wouldn't exactly call him a pretty boy, but he's not bad-looking. Shame he has such an unpleasant look on his face.

"We get days off in the military too, you know."

"Working on the weekend? You'll break yourself before you know it."

"I'm tougher than I look. I have a rigorous workout regimen."

"That's not really the issue…"

I didn't know what he was getting at, but it was clear that he was concerned about my health. Why couldn't he be this considerate all the time? *It makes me a little resentful.*

"Here we are," he said.

"…Here?"

He had brought me to a shop selling military surplus goods. Why had he come here? It didn't seem like a hot date spot.

"I told you it'd be a boring place for you, Lieutenant Commander."

"Oh, it's fine. Shall we go in? What brought you here, anyway?"

"Elma did. She said they'd have stuff Mimi would like." He walked into the store like he was familiar with the place.

I followed behind and peered at the goods inside. Combat helmets with anti-laser coating peeling off, combat armor with primary weapon holsters hanging by a thread, newer visors with multi-scanners installed… *Wait, those are only one generation old. Why are they here? They look new enough. They should be still in use by units that have yet to upgrade their loadouts. It's too early for them to be marked as surplus…*

"Something on your mind?" he asked me.

"Oh, a little. Not that I want any of this."

How had these made it here? I was curious, but it was beyond the reach of my authority to investigate. Perhaps I ought to send a report to the outpost inventory management department.

"Here's what we came for," he said, pointing at a particular shelf.

"…Combat rations?"

"Yeah, y'know. Mimi likes trying new foods, so she was excited to find these."

"Ah, I suppose so… Combat rations are quite an *odd* choice, though," I mused.

"Have you ever eaten them?"

"All the time back in the Officer Training Academy. I haven't had them since I've been deployed on duty, though."

The Officer Training Academy included terrestrial infantry training as well, especially in the case of imperial nobles, who were brought up to be the sword and shield of the empire. I was no exception to the rule. We were given infantry guns and combat armor, burdened with backpacks full of rocks, and forced to crawl through mud. Most of us noble candidates had been augmented already, so nobody complained, though whether we could handle the psychological burden was a different matter entirely.

"But these are a kind I haven't eaten," I added. "The contents are different from my time as a noble officer candidate, as well."

"Noble officer candidate?"

"Focus on the topic at hand, please… Anyway, you need to go to the Officer Training Academy before you can be an officer. Obvious, no?"

"Huh. Is there a point to discriminating between nobles and non-nobles, though?"

"Of course there is. Many nobles have received body augments, so we are physically stronger and better at processing information. It wouldn't be fair to train nobles alongside people with no augmentation."

"Ah, I see. So you're seen as higher beings than commoners who haven't been augmented."

"I wouldn't go that far. Without augments, we are no different from common folk. Besides, the funds for our augmentations come from taxes. It's simple discrimination. That is why we must stand as sword and shield for the citizens who blessed us with these augments through the sweat of their brows."

Part of me saw it as somewhat shameless, but this was our public position. I had joined the military to avoid being married off to a man weaker than me. There I was, a mere maiden, trouncing each and every so-called marriage candidate my father and grandfather had tried to foist upon me. Now, I enjoyed a rather long moratorium on the subject while I served in the military. I was in no hurry to be married. Not one bit.

"Very upright… Huh, I guess that's what they call 'noblesse oblige,' right?"

He admired my principles and nodded along. He was charming when he was mild like this—even if he was occasionally impudent to the point of hatefulness.

"Are you going to buy any of these?" I asked him.

"We bought one of all forty-eight, so no. We've already opened four. They're surprisingly edible."

"Indeed. Food greatly affects morale, after all. I hear the empire's rations are on the tastier side, if nothing else."

"If nothing else, huh?"

"Yes, if nothing else. These are normal-specification combat rations, so they're typically not horrible. The ones made for extreme environments are…a little difficult to stomach."

"Whoa, scary. What are they like?"

"There might be some around here. Let's see…" I looked around and found a shelf full of rations for extreme regions shoved in a corner. They were unsurprisingly inexpensive—less than half the price of normal ones. "Here you go."

"Pretty compact, huh?"

That they were. The size and weight of one meal was less than half that of the regular-specification rations.

I explained, "They contain high-protein sausage, high-calorie nutritional bars, and nutritional jelly."

"That's it?"

"Yes, that is it. They're made to provide you with essential calories, minerals, and vitamins."

"What kind of extreme environment forces a modern military force into eating that stuff…?"

"You'd be surprised. There are countless planets with extreme environments uninhabitable by humans like ourselves. The Empire controls even these locales, and there are people who fight every day to transform them into habitable environments. Likewise, the imperial Fleet exists in part to protect those very people."

“Ha ha, they must have it rough…” He grimaced. “Thinking about it, though, I might find myself in a long-term battle eventually. Maybe I should grab a few.”

He picked up a package containing a dozen extreme-environment ration packs. He’d already bought a full set of normal rations; did he really need these? Not that he lacked storage space. That mothership was far too big for the five or six people they had aboard.

“Actually, Lieutenant Commander, I’ve been wondering. How many people are in your Pirate-Hunting Unit in total?”

“That is confidential information. Why do you ask?”

“Curiosity is all. I mean, our *Krishna* and *Black Lotus* operate with six people altogether. Even with Mei’s help, it’s a pretty huge ship to run with just six people. Makes me wonder if the Pirate-Hunting Unit is lean on manpower, too.”

It seemed he truly was asking out of curiosity. He seemed unexpectedly thirsty for knowledge for a man his age. Perhaps it wasn’t appearances alone that made him seem more youthful than he was.

“Pure curiosity, hm? I wouldn’t recommend probing into military secrets out of interest alone. I’ll forget I heard the question.”

“Thanks.”

As it happened, I oversaw five hundred subordinates in my unit. About one hundred of them were space marines, so only four hundred were devoted to operating the ships. Of course, those hundred marines did not idle away the days, either. Altogether, our formation was one battleship, five cruisers, three destroyers, and two corvettes—eleven ships altogether. That left about forty-five people per ship.

That was only an average, of course; battleships and corvettes had quite different personnel requirements. The *Lestarius*, for instance, was an enormous ship over a kilometer long.

The reason we could operate huge ships with so little manpower was a testament to how much ship automation had advanced. That was especially true of maintenance. If we tried to run the *Lestarius* with human labor alone, all five hundred would probably not be enough.

After buying the rations and arranging to have them sent to his ship, we left the surplus store. This shop just might get a visit from our supply management division in the coming days, but there would be no issue as long as they weren't doing anything suspicious. *Good luck with that, though.*

"Well, where to now?" I asked.

"Please don't be ridiculous. Didn't I tell you I don't know the area?"

He was being a little less formal with me now. I liked that. Whenever he didn't see me for a while, he ended up treating me like a stranger again, like a cat that refused to take to me. We had a black cat back at home that had shied away at first, but after enough time together, it had warmed up enough to let us pet it. I wondered how it was doing.

"Why are you so tense?" I asked him.

"For some reason, I feel like I'm in danger…"

"How rude… So? Aren't you going to take me anywhere else?"

"Sorry, but I don't really know anything fun around here."

"Neither do I. It seems we are quite alike."

We both raised our hands in surrender. If we had been in the capital, I'd be able to show him around, but I didn't know this outpost well. The place wasn't entirely without recreation, but…well, many of the places here were rather *unwholesome*.

"I have an idea."

"Let's hear it."

"Would you like to go swimming?"

"Huh?!"

His eyes went wide—it seemed he was truly shocked. *Hee hee. Just seeing that look on your face makes this worth it.*

***

We walked together for a while until we entered a building, where we separated to change clothes. Naturally, the changing rooms were segregated. As an unmarried noble woman, I would never disrobe before a man. It was difficult to explain why a swimsuit was better…but as long as it wasn't a bikini, it would probably be no issue.

"Oh…now that's marvelous," he commented.

"I suggest you don't stare too much."

I thought I'd be unfazed by wearing a swimsuit, but no, it was embarrassing. Not that I let that emotion show on my face. *I'm not blushing, right? Surely I'm not.*

"I can't believe this outpost has a place like this."

"The outpost has many heat sources. Some of the water used for cooling flows here for the sake of recreation."

The generators creating energy for the outpost and the laser turrets defending it were massive heat sources. The engineers constructing them had taken great pains to find ways to cool them properly.

"Huh… Well, I guess it's good exercise. Not bad."

"Engineers working in low-gravity areas use it quite often, I hear," I added.

He surveyed the pool. "So you say, but there's nobody else here."

But of course not. This pool was reserved for noble officers only. It cost quite a bit to use, but in return, we were able to rent out the entire thing for a certain period of time. It seemed like a bit too much luxury for a single military woman…but if I could use it, then why shouldn't I? I was nothing if not rational.

"Fortunately, it seems to be reserved at the moment. I certainly appreciate not having to worry about prying eyes, don't you?"

"Fair, I guess."

It seemed he'd decided to go with the flow. Then, he started performing a strange series of movements. *Is he…dancing? Perhaps not.*

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"You gotta warm up before you get in the pool, right?"

“I’ve never heard such a thing.”

“Seriously? What if your leg cramps up? That’s dangerous.” He then struck an odd pose and began stretching his arm, leg, and back muscles.

I’ve heard flexibility training make exercise more efficient and reduces accidents…not that it’s needed for augmented people such as myself.

Now that I got a good look at him, he had a nice body. Tight, muscular. Though his legs seemed a little lacking compared to his upper body.

“Just staring at me now, huh?” He smirked. “Are you a secret pervert, Lieutenant Commander?”

“Wha—?!” How could he say such a thing?! “My eyes were just drawn to your strange stretches! That’s all!”

“Ha ha ha! Kidding, kidding. You should try copying me. First, put your right leg forward and stretch your left one back… There you go. Really stretch your calf and Achilles tendon.” For some reason, he smiled at my indignation and urged me to stretch alongside him.

I did not protest. Doing these “warmups” would give him an opportunity to look at my swimsuit-clad figure as well. I was wearing was a one-piece swimsuit rather than a bikini, but it still showed off the curves of my body. While it did compress my chest somewhat, it was enough to show off my womanly charms.

“Yeah, that’s military for you. You’ve got a trim figure. Oh, maybe that’s thanks to the augments, too?” The man surveyed only my muscles. His eyes did not linger on my chest, my hips…any of my sexual features!

This was bizarre, wasn’t it? Let me say this yet again for emphasis: I am *objectively* beautiful.

“Why…” I trailed off.

“Hmm?”

“Why won’t you look at me lustfully?!”

“Uhh…”

Why did he gaze at me as if I’d said something disappointing? *I’m going to get angry. I might even punch you. I’ll cry as I beat you to a pulp with my augmented muscles!*

“Lieutenant Commander…”

“What?”

“I’m not augmented. No matter how lovely you are, I’d never look at you sexually, let alone try anything. A human can’t beat a gorilla.”

“Who are you calling a gorilla? Also, can you stop looking so serious? Do you want me to crush you between my fingers?”

“That’s exactly what I mean!” He jumped into the pool with a splash.

Mrgh! Trying to flee, are you? My, I’ve never seen that style of swimming before. You’re surprisingly fast, but don’t think you can outswim someone who’s been augmented!

“Wait, you!”

“Holy crap, you can jump that far?! Ack…! Glub…”

Hee hee! I’ll make you pay for treating me like a gorilla. How long can you hold your breath, I wonder?

Afterword

THANK YOU for picking up Volume 6 of *Reborn as a Space Mercenary*!

Time for the part where we talk about the author's life. Recently, my friend got me into this game where you rob banks in groups of four. Ignoring stealth entirely and going in, guns blazing, to rob them… I mean, heck, we're more like heavily armed terrorists at that point! It always ends up like that when at least one person in the group doesn't have a mind for stealth. Just can't help it.

Also, I've been playing that one game where the protagonist is a certain famous English gentleman from detective novels. His powers of observation are honestly superhuman. Seeing a razor left behind, figuring out what kind of person you are based on your clothes, handkerchief pattern, or rings… It's terrifying. I'd love to write a book about someone with incredible powers of observation and deduction like that.

Now, let's leave my video game talk there and chat about what happened in this book like usual. This time, Hiro interferes with a fight between the Imperial Fleet and crystal life-forms and shows off his firepower to the empire for the first time.

Now the movers and shakers of the empire are sure to have their eyes on him! Good job, Hiro! Though those will just be the first sparks of a blaze of trouble for him. Good, good! Keep on suffering for our entertainment!

I've also added more interactions with the crew. And Lieutenant Commander Serena appears! Hooray!

That's enough about the plot. Next, we'll move on to the part where I talk about some setting details that couldn't be discussed in the book. Specifically, let's talk about ship sizes and their passengers.

In this book, the ships referred to as small craft range from twenty to fifty meters long. Medium craft are wider and range from sixty to 300 meters, while large craft can go from 300 to 600 meters. Imperial ships tend to be a little harder to distinguish, but their largest regular motherships can

be as long as 2,500 meters. Battleships are 1,500; cruisers are below 1,000. Corvettes are about as big as medium ships, and destroyers are as big as large ships.

As for the *Krishna*, it's around forty to fifty meters long, barely fitting in the small craft category. The *Black Lotus* is four to five hundred meters, making it a large craft. But the *Black Lotus* can't fit a medium craft inside it, so it would more technically be categorized as a "medium mothership." But going through all of that won't leave us with space to talk about minimum personnel requirements! So let's leave it aside for now.

The ships in this series are able to run with extremely limited crews thanks to highly advanced automation. The *Krishna*'s maximum personnel capacity is a mere five people, but it can be handled well enough by just a single person. As for the *Black Lotus*, its minimum capacity is three people, but Mei's able to use her specs to operate it all on her own.

The 1,500-meter *Lestarius* requires a minimum of ten people to operate it. Serena's Pirate-Hunting Unit, made up of one battleship, five cruisers, three destroyers, and two corvettes, is only of a medium scale—500 people—even when you include the personnel who are there just to fight in hand-to-hand combat.

In contrast, the U.S. Navy's missile cruisers have minimum manpower requirement of more than 300 people. You can see that spaceships in this universe can really run with super small crews!

Well, I'd say it's about time I wrapped this up.

Thank you to my manager, K; Tetsuhiro Nabeshima, our illustrator; and everyone involved in the publication of this book. Most of all, a huge thank-you to everyone who bought and read this volume.

Let's meet again in Volume 7! I'm certain it'll come out! I'll do my best!

—RYUTO

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ryuto

A brown bear living in Hokkaido.

My hobby is gaming. I have a wide range of tastes, but survival action and strategy games are my absolute favorites.

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